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LANCASHIRE FICTION RESERVE

THE MASTER OF THE MICROBE

A Fantastic Romance

BY

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"The Trail of '98," "The Rough-neck," etc.

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PART I

UNCLE CYRUS

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CHAPTER I

THE HATE OF HERMANN KRUG

1

To tell the truth, I had been drinking heavily.
Why I had been drinking I will explain later.

In the meantime I am too eager to relate the strange experience that brought me to my senses.

On the night I write of, I had been stacking up saucers in that citadel of flaming youth, the Café du Dôme. At that moment I rather fancied myself as a realistic author, having written two short stories, "Bad Breath" and "Linked by Fat," which were going the rounds. I was also well launched on my novel, *Garbage : A Study of Prostitution.*

So I joined the crowd of Modernists in the Dôme, and expounded my theories of Personality in Art, the Preciousness of the Mood, and the Tyranny of Tradition. That very evening I remember declaring that fiction should be "static and morose"; that it should taboo the Unusual, eliminate the Extraordinary. . . . Alas! I am now inclined to believe that as far as I am concerned it is only the extraordinary that is usual. But you will hear.

I must have been confoundedly pickled that night, for I remember nothing from the time I left the Dôme till I found myself at my door, trying to get in without making any noise.

Now, I want to make this quite clear. I was living in the studio of my friend Wistley, who had gone to America. This studio looked down on the Place du Pantheon. It was situated over Wistley's apartment on the sixth floor, and was reached by a stairway leading from the hall.
But, though I lived in the studio, I knew nothing of the

apartment. Indeed, I assumed it was locked up, and in any case it did not interest me. However, on this occasion, as I was crossing the hall to reach the stairs, I saw under the door opposite me a dim line of light.

I must admit that this faint light startled me, even scared me a little. It was so unexpected. Could Wistley have returned? What would he think of me in my fuddled state? Imagine me there in the dark, latch-key in hand, staring stupidly at that line of light. Finally, with drunken gravity, I decided I must look into the matter. Softly going forward I opened the door and peered in. Then I paused, bewildered, wondering if I was not dreaming.

On a small table a lamp with a green shade sprayed a luminous circle, and into it was projected a hand. The light was so concentrated I could see the hand very plainly. It was clawlike, with swollen veins. But the owner of the hand I could not see, for he was huddled on a couch drawn up to the table.

Plainly not the plump hand of Wistley. Bracing myself I was stepping forward to investigate when the man stirred. His face came into the light. It was not a nice face – a hawklike nose, scaly eyes, leathery skin, purplish lips; but the brow, crowned by a shock of grey hair, was highly intellectual.

"Is that you, Anton?" he called in English with a harsh foreign accent.

Then like a flash I realised. Drunken fool that I was, I had mistaken the apartment. These cursed doors! They were exactly alike and obviously responded to the same key. Now I remembered: the adjoining apartment was occupied by an old professor. . . . Well I had made a blunder and must correct it. But how? To announce myself would be to scare this old chap into a fit. While I was considering, I heard footsteps in the hall.

A panic seized me, for, be it remembered, I was less than half sober. If only I could get out of the place without being seen! When the coast was clear perhaps I could; but already the steps were at the door. In another moment, like a thief in the night, I would be discovered.

In my dismay I looked behind me. There at my back was a deep cupboard. Then, acting on one of those infernal impulses which so often have landed me in a mess, I slipped

through the half-open door. In an instant I was concealed in the gloom of the cupboard.

And as I waited, with head hazy and heart thumping, this is what I heard and saw – or, at least, imagined I heard and saw. . . .

2

First of all, a man appeared in the doorway, an ostrich-like creature with a diminutive head on which the hair was cropped close.

"Did you call, Uncle?" he said.

"Yes. But I thought you were in the room."

"Why, no, Uncle."

"I must have been dreaming. I have queer dreams sometimes – dreadful dreams. . . . How many deaths to-day, Anton?"

"One hundred and forty-eight, Uncle."

"And yesterday?"

"A hundred and thirty-seven."

"Slow, too slow. We must do better than that. Have we a good supply of the culture?"

"A large one."

"Who is planting it?"

"Fischer and Klein."

"Tell them to work harder. I am impatient to see real results."

"You must remember, Uncle, we are now operating in a clean country. It is not like Poland, where we killed them off like rotten rabbits. Our microbe triumphs in verminous poverty. But here every case is promptly isolated. They are fighting it desperately, and so far they have not lost their heads."

"Ha! they will. When in spite of their precautions the figures mount and mount panic will follow. All who can will fly. For the fear of the pest is as a madness. An invading army is negligible beside this invisible terror against which men can do nothing."

"So far they can do nothing."

"No, night and day their scientists are poring over my microbe. They may isolate it, they may cultivate it, but I defy them to check it. Never will they find a remedy for the

plague that threatens to decimate them. And I have that remedy, I, Hermann Krug. Ah! if they only knew!"

"If they only knew, my good uncle, they would tear you limb from limb."

"And you, too, my excellent nephew."

"I know the risks we are running. That's why I don't want to engage more agents. And if I may suggest it, we might hush our voices when we speak of those things. Even walls have ears, and the secret police of Paris are said to be almost omniscient."

"Yet they do not suspect the pest is being propagated from their very midst."

"No, they believe it comes from outside. But one cannot be too careful, especially as we are reaching a point where terror will be sown broadcast. By the summer we should total ten thousand deaths a day."

"That will be better. But as soon as the epidemic gets a firm grip it might be as well to . . . eliminate our two comrades."

"I have thought of it. That reminds me I have a rendezvous with them to-night to deliver more of the culture. They are trying to infect the reservoirs."

" And I, too, Anton, am going out to-night. Ah! you look surprised; but I, too, have an appointment."

"It must be important to take you out . . . at night."

"Aye, night air is bad for an old carcass. But this is something special. . . . Listen! I go to meet someone who has offered me a fabulous price for the serum."

"Ah! . . . How much?"

"A milliard."

"Who?"

"I do not know. For some time I have been in communication with secret agents of our Government. They know I have been seeking a serum that will combat the Purple Pest; but . . . they do not know I have discovered that serum."

"Are we not both inoculated with it?"

"Happily, or long ago we would have perished. Ha! I have worked in secret, and not even to you, my sister's son, have I explained the nature of my researches. Briefly, I have found out that my precious microbe is subject to supermicrobes, just as all animals are subject to vermin. It was

difficult to isolate these, but by filtration through stone I ultimately succeeded. Once isolated, their culture was fast and prolific. This bacillus has the power of destroying the germ of the Purple Pest, and is itself harmless to man. It would be easy to manufacture a vaccine of great efficacy in unlimited quantities."

"And will you manufacture it?"

"For my country alone."

"You are not a humanitarian, my uncle."

"No, I am a patriot. For a dozen years I have lived with one thought – revenge; just as thousands, aye, millions, of us are living to-day. Ah! these fools with their talk of peace and goodwill. How we laugh at them! For one thing we hope – the day when we can strike back and strike to destroy. But no one looked for it before another twenty years. Well, thanks to me, that day is now. In these trembling hands is the ruin and the remedy, the scourge and the salvation. With my left hand I can slay; with my right I can save. Well, my right is for my country, my left is for her foes. Now you understand. I will prepare my serum for our people only."

"Then you will not sell it?"

"No, I work for glory, not for gold."

"But one may be a good patriot and still profit by one's patriotism."

"Bah! What could money mean to me? I have lived for science alone. When my work is done, I will go home and die. When – my – work – is – done."

"But, Uncle, suppose this money was offered by some multi-millionaire patriot? Why not accept it?"

"My good nephew, you are base and sordid – the son of a Whitechapel Jew. At the mention of money your eyes glisten. You would like to handle it. . . . Hah! You never will. To-night I go to refuse this offer with scorn."

"Then why go?"

"Because if the person I meet can convince me he is an agent of our Government, I will talk to him as one patriot to another. I will not sell, I will *give*, my discovery. When I am sure of his genuine character, I will . . . begin negotiations with those higher up."

"But for the moment you will reveal nothing?"

"Nothing. Yonder in my private safe I keep the secret of my serum. There is a small bottle containing a sample of it,

and detailed instructions how to prepare it. It is enclosed in a silver cylinder and carefully sealed. I explain this in case anything should happen to me. I meant to tell you some time, but to-night I dare not put it off any longer."

"And so you are determined to see this mysterious person?"

"Yes, I got word to meet him. After all, what danger can there be? I carry no papers, and to kill me would destroy all hope of securing the serum."

"And you say, Uncle, it's . . . in that safe?"

"In that safe. . . . And now, Anton, leave me to rest. I feel this is a vital night. Great things are about to happen . . . colossal things. . . ."

3

I heard the man leave the room, and after a little the sound of his going out by the front door. The old professor heard, too, for he rose furtively and turned on an overhead light. It revealed in the corner of the room a small yellow safe. With another cautious look around he bent down and fumbled over the combination. The thick steel door swung open.

A moment later he was holding in his hand a cylinder of silver that glistened in the light. It seemed to be about six inches long and an inch in diameter. He held it up, looking at it exultingly. After a gloating moment, he bent over the safe again and returned it to its place. Carefully he closed the door, then threw off the combination.

Switching off the overhead light, he went to the window. Night-born Paris lay beneath him. Under the pink glow of the sky it was like a jewelled carpet. The mighty dome of the Pantheon loomed black before him; beyond was the grey old steeple of St. Genevieve; below, the twin towers of Notre Dame. Dimly to the left could be seen the Church of St. Sulpice and the proud pile of the Invalides. Still more dimly, tapered the slender shadow of the Eiffel Tower. Resplendent in her pride and beauty, the Queen of Cities greeted him.

But he had no eyes for all that. On the contrary, he seemed to be brooding evilly over the scene. Finally, he opened the window and went out on the little balcony beyond. I could see him as he stood there, leaning over. It seemed to me his

hands were clenched in hate and his face distorted, till he looked like one of those hideous gargoyles of Notre Dame.

A fit of coughing seized him, so that he was obliged to come in and close the window. But still he stood there, gloating evilly. Then suddenly his voice seemed to crackle in the silence, a hot voice, hoarse with hate.

"*France, your hour is at hand. The War cost you five million of your best; this will cost you fifty million. To all your insolence and oppression this is my answer—revenge a thousand-fold. We might have nursed our hate a hundred years, but thanks to me, to Hermann Krug, the time is now.*"

Then, after fumbling a little in the hallway, I heard him, too, go out.

4

How I regained my room I have no clear recollection. The next thing I remember is awakening in my bed with a violent headache, and an impression that the whole thing was a dream. It was all so hazy, so unreal. . . .

"Bah!" I told myself. "It's too absurd. Like a melodrama at the Porte St. Martin. Two cheap actors rehearsing their parts. Such things simply don't happen. If they did, it would be my duty at once to inform the police. But I won't. . . ."

As I dressed I continued to reflect. "If there was anything in it, what a diabolical plot! Of course, it's possible. Anything's possible. There's really an old professor living next door, and there's really the beginning of a nice juicy epidemic. But the nations don't hate one another any more. That's all over. The Locarno spirit and that sort of thing. I guess both of those guys downstairs are a bit nutty. . . . Still, it's interesting. If it wasn't all so darned fantastic I might use the idea in my work. But I don't do that line of dope. Realism - drab, sordid, humdrum life - that's the stuff of Art. Reminds me, I had better write another chapter of *Garbage*. . . ."

So I tried to dismiss the matter from my mind, but it refused to be dismissed. My imagination was playing me strange tricks. The gargoyle face of the old professor haunted me, and with curious vividness the scene kept coming back. I was hearing his venomous voice, the hissing hate of his broken English. That night in the Dôme I did not attempt

to lay down the latest law on Art, but sat silent and apart over a cup of coffee.

Then, as usual, when I failed to distract my mind with alcohol, it began to brood on *that other matter*, the thought which was torture to me. Again, my trouble surged in on me, overwhelming me, sweeping me to the verge of . . . Ah! who knows what!

But listen a little, and I'll tell you the whole story.

CHAPTER II

ISN'T LIFE GLORIOUS!

1

"ISN'T life glorious!" said I.

"Sometimes," sighed Rosemary.

"I think it is at all times. But I take such an interest in things. Big things and little things. Especially little things. I've a child's sense of wonder. Every time I drive a car I'm lost in wonder. Every time I switch on the electric light I feel as if I were performing a miracle."

"That's because you lived so long where there were neither cars nor electricity."

"Yes, I was civilised late. I get a lot of fun you folks don't. Modern machinery, for instance. I think modern machinery is more beautiful than all the junk of antiquity. Perhaps because I'm incapable of understanding it."

"Yet your father was an engineer."

"A mining engineer. That's different. . . ."

I fell silent, so that she looked up at me quickly. She had to look up; for though she was tall, I topped her by a head and shoulders. I wish I could describe her worthily. She was of that fragile, flowerlike type, which, if I were a moving picture magazine writer I might call "orchidaceous." Her hair was chestnut, but her eyes were gentian-blue. Their expression was so intense that it could best be described as "divine wistfulness." Her features were delicate, with an air of distinction. A grave, sympathetic face, softly sensitive in its colouring. There was the promise of rare beauty in Rosemary, though as yet her slender figure was unformed. Simply but richly dressed, at first glance you would have said she was French.

"Yes, it's glorious," I repeated, after a long pause. "You know I've always been a happy chap, but to-day I'm happier than I ever dreamed I could be. And looking back I don't see how I *could* have been happy – without you. It seems now to

have been an egregious, besotted sort of happiness. This here is the real thing."

Appreciatively I looked about me. We were climbing the Road of Many Waters, which in mid-May is the most radiant road in all Auvergne. At its foot nestle the red roofs of Royat, at its head soars the purple Puy du Dôme. And the road lingers as if in love with all the shining beauty about it, weaving amid cushy meadows gay with birds and brook, skirting bosky glades made sonorous by secret waterfalls. On either hand are banks embroidered with daisies, or ablaze with the *bouton d'or*. There are pools of violets and laughing waves of daffodils. Cherry trees snow down their petals, while the silver birches climb, lustrous-leaved, to shine like lamps against the pines.

So up this road for lovers we two went dreaming, till again I broke the blissful silence.

"Can you beat it!" I said exultantly. "It's all here, the joy-stuff. Youth, spring, beauty, song. . . . Ah! I wish I could put into words what I feel."

"I think you do very well."

"If I could express all I felt, I'd make Romeo and Cyrano look like four-flushers. By gosh! How could I live without you?"

"You seem to have managed nicely up to a year ago."

"Yes, but I realise what a bovine ass I was. Now my eyes are opened. The thought of a life without you is too appalling. I say, Rosemary, wouldn't it have been tragic if we had never met?"

"We'd never have known any better."

"That's the tragedy of it. We'd have gone on serenely unconscious. And to think we might have missed each other altogether."

"Life's full of people missing each other."

"Thank God, we haven't. We nearly did, though."

"Yes, if Auntie hadn't got it into her head that her heart was weak and come to Royat for the cure; and if she hadn't decided that it was less trouble to take me with her than to leave me in Paris."

"And if I hadn't found I could study French better in Clermont than in Montparnasse; and if on the day of the fair your aunt's little toy terrier hadn't run in the way of a motor lorry."

"And if you hadn't happened to be there and heard me scream and dashed to the rescue, then——"

"Then we'd probably be 'strangers yet.' You know though, it's an awfully hackneyed way to be introduced. All the authors use it."

"We can't help it. The fact remains that it *was* due to that silly little Friquet we met. . . . I hid my eyes."

"Pshaw! There was no risk. If there had been I'd have done something to deserve your gratitude."

"Auntie would have had a heart attack if he'd been hurt."

"Poor Friquet! How much we owe him. Wasn't he the funny little beggar? Like a rat; no hair and always shivering. How I remember his tiny, pointed head, and his big, bulging eyes that were perpetually weeping. Where is he?"

"He died last winter at San Sebastian of whooping-cough."

"Dear me! Some day we must go and lay a wreath upon his tomb. But do you remember, after I had grabbed him from beneath the very wheels of the Juggernaut, how we sat under the *marroniers* and you recovered from your fright? And how we talked politely at first; then more freely; then we made the stupendous discovery that we were – cousins."

"Yes, it was like a bit out of a story book. I was scarcely aware of your existence up to then. Vaguely I knew I had a cousin somewhere in that romantic region known as the Far West."

"And I knew that my uncle's daughter was being educated in Europe, but it didn't seem to interest me. Yet we were bound to meet eventually. The wonder is we haven't met before. It seems as if something has kept us apart. Well, it's the happy ending."

"It's but the beginning," said Rosemary gravely. "Why did you leave your studies at Harvard and rush over here?"

"To see you, my dear, I'd have come twice as far."

"But your work – leaving in the middle of the course."

"You can't understand. When I get a notion in my head I simply have to follow it up. I felt I'd go crazy if I didn't see you. You came between me and my books."

"Auntie says it's only another of your escapades. She tells me that three times already you have run away and disappeared."

"My escapades haven't done me any harm."

"What did you do?"

"Once I travelled with a circus. Another time I worked for six months on a cattle run. Once I shipped on a schooner going to Pango Pango, because the name attracted me – though I wondered why they stopped at the second Pango. Anyway, that's more educative than any university, besides being no end of fun. However, I'm going to be a good boy now. No more fool breaks."

"But this – coming over here on an impulse, and for no real reason."

"I always act on impulse and I had the best reason in the world – to marry you."

She looked at me in startled amazement. " What do you mean, Harley?"

"I mean I just can't live without you. Got to marry you right away. I'm going to ask your father's consent; though, if he refuses, I'm going to marry you anyway."

"But . . . am I going to have nothing to say in the matter?"

"Sure. You're going to say 'Yes.' You leave it to me, Honey. I'll fix it up with the old man."

2

My assurance seemed to impress her, and so, hand in hand, we climbed the radiant hill. It was as if the sunshine was a part of us, and the joy of leaf and blade was in our veins. Our hearts were lyric with the birds, yet serene with the smiling sky. The waters sang a song of ecstasy in our ears, and all nature voiced the sweetness that surged within us.

Below us the road dipped through gulfs of green to the rosy roofs of Royat. Beyond, grandiosely glittered the plain. About us the lambent birches stormed the hillside till they encountered the saturnine resistance of the pines. We halted to look down at a little village of flat red roofs and walls of morose volcanic stone. Shining waters encircled and laced it, so that it seemed to be set in a network of streams. In its centre glittered a fountain, and through it ran a mill-race that flashed in a white cascade.

"Isn't it charming!" said Rosemary.

"Yes, but though the villagers live with water singing in their ears, I don't suppose they wash any more than they

can help. If I lived down there I'd stand under that cascade every morning and let it pound the breath out of me. But I don't suppose a single soul ever did that since Julius Cæsar discovered the place."

The millwheel was motionless, and some white ducks struggled in the current of the race. Two tiny pigs poked about in a very strawy manure heap. Some hens wallowed in a dust bath, and a dog dozed in the sun. In its setting of exultant grasses and the glow of spring, the village drowsed peacefully.

Lazily a lumpish girl came from a doorway, filled a pitcher at the fountain and returned to the cool gloom of the house. I could not help contrasting her with the delicate creature at my side. I could not imagine Rosemary poorly clad and living in a rude cottage. Abruptly I demanded:

"You love me, dear, don't you?"

"Of course I do."

"And you *will* marry me?"

She hesitated a moment. "If father consents."

A shadow seemed to cloud the brightness of her eyes and her face was pensive. I had a vision of her father sitting in his wheel-chair, white-faced and still.

"Why should he object?"

"We're first cousins."

"Among the Kachins of China it is forbidden to marry anyone but one's first cousin. No, if I know him, he won't stand in the way of our happiness."

"You know him better than I do."

She said this in such a queer tone that I turned to stare at her.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I haven't seen him during the last five years. My father and I are practically strangers."

"You don't tell me!"

"It's true. I wish I could understand, but it seems as if he tried to avoid seeing me. The last time we met he was so strange I wanted to cry. I love my father and I long for his affection, but he doesn't seem to care for me any more."

"Oh, I say! I can't understand anyone not simply adoring you, Rosemary. And your own father! If it was your aunt now."

"Auntie cares for me in her way, but she cares more for

society. She finds it rather a bore chaperoning me, and the sooner she can dispose of me the better she will be pleased. Already she has a nice young count picked out for me. Oh, don't look so fierce, Harley! If I can't marry you, I'll remain single always. I've got a will of my own, you know."

"You wouldn't be your father's daughter if you hadn't. It's only his will keeps him going. To think of him carrying on his business from a cripple's chair! But he's a stalwart American, he is; and I cannot see him welcoming a foreign count for a son-in-law."

"I'm not so sure. Look how he lets them do their best to make a French girl of me. Even Auntie calls me Rose Marie, while I have no memory of my own country. Ten years in a convent, and they talk of sending me back – if I don't marry the young count. I don't think father would mind a bit."

I regarded her with a puzzled frown. I couldn't reconcile her account of her father with my knowledge of the man who had befriended me. Cyrus Quin had a reputation for kindness that was almost world-wide. There was something wrong somewhere. And I did not like the gay set her aunt affected. Rosemary was so sweet, so pure, it seemed as if they were conspiring to make her as sophisticated as themselves. Abruptly I asked:

"Who is that man who follows your aunt about?"

"Monsieur de Florac! Oh, he's an old friend of the family. He knew father in the early days. He's quite charming – so nice to me."

I snorted. I had met the Comte de Florac and instantly disliked him. Not that I had anything against him, except that he seemed a rather cynical man of the world. Ah! between the lot of them it looked as if Rosemary would be spoiled. Well, not if I could prevent it.

"You're not going to marry anyone," I told her, "but little me. And if need be, I'll carry you off. I haven't got a red cent, but I guess we won't starve. Up to now I've been a care-free, irresponsible fool. Well, that's over. Now I feel all sorts of force in me – definite, driving force. With you to inspire me, dearest, I'm going forward: *bing! bing!*"

"I like to hear you talk like that."

"I'm not bragging. I know I can do things. My worst vice has been versatility, but now I'm going to stick to one thing and do it well."

"I know you can."

"You bet I can! The last time I saw your father he reproached me gently. He has always been indulgent, but he told me frankly he thought it time I settled down. In fact, he offered to start me in business. He's got a paint and varnish factory, somewhere in Detroit, that brings in about thirty thousand dollars a year. Well, he offered to hand it over to me, if I would begin at the bottom and work there six years."

"And you refused?"

"Hang it! I haven't got all the romance knocked out of me yet. And paints and varnish! Besides, I've always disliked Detroit. No, I begged a year to consider."

"And you are still considering?"

"No, I've decided. Paint and varnish it's to be. No more flirting with the arts. In six years I'll be president of that flourishing concern. Then I'll put in a good man to run it, and we'll hit the trail for Europe. I'm going right away to see your father, and to convince him I have a real passion for paints and varnish. Also to get his consent to our engagement."

"And if he refuses?"

"Then Romance comes into its own. Could you be happy with me if we were poor and lived in a cottage?"

"Happier than in a palace without you. But I have my music. I could make money teaching. I wouldn't want to be a drag on you."

I laughed. The idea of the daughter of a multi-millionaire teaching music!

"Drag! Why, you'd be the finest inspiration ever a man had. If the folks down in that village can be happy, then we can. Well, it's to be money-grubbing and sordid security versus poverty and romance."

And in a spirit of gay rebellion I half hoped my uncle would not consent.

3

Then we came to a crystal spring that welled up from a bed of cress and vanished in ripples amid the grass. In its flow the blades bent silverly. I cupped some water in my hands, and she drank a little. How delicate, how flowerlike, she seemed! As if even a caress might hurt her. Again the fear

of exposing her to poverty rose like a spectre, but scornfully I dismissed it. Never would she suffer, so long as I had strength to shield her.

Suddenly we looked up, to see an old woman regarding us kindly. She was knitting by the roadside, and herding half a dozen sheep. Despite the hot sun, she was dressed in black, even to a poke bonnet. She had a black dog that contrasted with the cropped whiteness of her sheep. The dog approached us, but she called it back: "Zola! Zola!"

"I wonder if he's called after the great Emile?" I speculated, but Rosemary answered: "She probably means 'Zulu.' He's so black, you see."

Those nice sheep nibbled our fingers and allowed themselves to be caressed. Rosemary lifted a lamb and kissed it, while the old dame, without ceasing to knit, beamed at us rosily over her spectacles. Even Zulu barked joyously; so, in an atmosphere of goodwill, we went our way.

We were now on the high plateau that lies at the base of the Puy du Dôme. We passed men ploughing with cows, the ploughshare a tree root.

"How jolly primitive! Let's walk to that little village hiding among the trees."

In the centre of the village was a monument to their war dead. It was carved in the black volcanic stone of the country, and represented a *poilu* throwing a bomb. All round its base were the names of those who had perished, the same family name occurring with pathetic frequency. Some mothers must have given all their sons. Such a tiny village; so many names pitifully repeating.

"Let's rest in the coolness of the church," I suggested. "In this country the door of the church is always open, and even the humblest is interesting."

This one was so simple, so speckless, it struck a new note. Here was no gorgeousness of stained glass, no aping of grandeur. The whitewashed pillars went plainly up to the groined roof, which was painted a sky blue and sprinkled with golden stars.

"It reminds me of the room your father sits in so much," I remarked. "Weast calls it the Star Chamber. You know, Rosemary, I can't get your father's treatment of you out of my head. There must be something behind it. Someone must have set him against you; but who could it be? He's a recluse.

There's only his secretary, Miss Dale, who sees anything of him. And she's a good scout, a pal of mine."

"Why should she harm me? I don't know her. But don't let us talk of it, dear. Let's be happy."

So, hand in hand, we sat on a bench of varnished pine, with the sun from the western window falling on us like a benediction. Then the priest in charge entered softly and filled the vases before the altar with wild lilies. He had a wise, kindly face. As he looked at us, his eyes lighted up with pleasure. "Lovers," he was probably thinking, and with a gentle sigh, he left us.

4

From the cool twilight of the church we went into the mellowing sunshine. On a low hill three crosses stood against the sky, and from a lane dazzling with hawthorn we climbed to them. The broom dripped gold about us and brushed us silkily. Little white roses starred the sward. In the sunshine the Puy du Dôme was all emerald glory, and where the desolation of the mountain began a shepherd watched his sheep.

As we sat in the shadow of the crosses, the peace of the solitudes seemed to stretch out to us. We looked down on green lands, and lonely farms, and little roads. Shining tranquillity bathed them, while in a serene and luminous pattern the valley undulated to the hills. It was as if all the world partook of the peace and joy that filled us.

"I have a terrible admission to make," I said, breaking that delicious silence.

She looked alarmed.

"I am obliged to confess," I went on, "that you are – my first sweetheart. I seem to have missed the usual experiences. I was brought up in the Far North, where the only women were squaws. Nearly always I've mixed with men. It's true – you're my first, my only love."

"How wonderful!"

"But what about you? Have you ever cared for anyone before?"

"I've never had the chance. How could I, spending all my life in a convent? You're the first boy I've ever really known."

A little damped, I went on: "First love for both of us. How splendid! We'll keep it up to the end."

"To the very end. If I can't marry you, I'll become a nun."

"Whatever happens you must wait for me. I'm going to see your father. I'll leave to-night."

"If you go to Paris be careful. They say this new kind of *grippe* is very bad there."

"Poof! Nothing to it. No, I'll see the old man to-morrow, get his consent, sprint back with the glad tidings. But I fear it's Detroit for us. Well, with you, Rosemary, even Pittsburgh would be Paradise."

5

As we went slowly home how heavenly everything seemed! The woods were hoar with the wild cherry, the open spaces blazed with gorse. Never did the birds cease to sing. The thrush rhapsodised in the willows, the lark in the high blue. In the snow of orchards the merle was melodious, while from dim groves came the cuckoo's call. Song, sunshine, and in our hearts happiness ineffable. Ah! there will never be another day like that.

So as we passed through the sunny woods, her arms were full of wild flowers and my arms were full – of her. Frequently and fondly our lips met, while our eyes shone with a holy joy. At the edge of the trees we halted.

"Whatever happens you'll wait for me?" I asked again.

"Whatever happens."

A last lingering kiss, then there came to me a sense of infinite peace.

"Isn't life glorious!" said I.

"Glorious!" sighed Rosemary.

CHAPTER III

THE FRIEND OF THE FAMILY

As everyone knows, in the latitudinous nomenclature of any French provincial town, the Café du Monde is generally situated between the Hotel du Globe and the Taverne de l'Univers. In Clermont, the Café du Monde might aptly have been called the Café du Demi-monde; for it had a retinue of ladies of infinite leisure that would have done credit (or discredit) to a grand café on the boulevards.

Indeed, it was owing to those charming creatures that I conspicuously avoided the place. Obviously an American (and are not all Americans ridiculously rich?), I was at once the object of their flattering attentions. At first I was apparently oblivious to their smiles, but as they grew bolder I retreated to a chaster establishment.

After leaving Rosemary, however, having two hours to wait for my train, I installed myself at an obscure table on the terrace of the Café du Monde. Nothing stronger would I order than a cup of coffee, for in my exalted state I felt that any beverage even remotely alcoholic would be a sacrilege. I wanted to be intoxicated with love alone.

So sitting there I dallied with delightful dreams. Rosemary and I would build our home nest and voyage like the swallows. A few years of sordid commercial striving, and I would be rich. Riches meant freedom, travel, culture. I would resume my studies in sociology, perhaps write a book. My book would be comprehensive in scope and epigrammatic in expression. I would become a wise and kindly man – something like Uncle Cyrus, only less austere. Rosemary and I would do all kinds of good in the world, helping humanity, working for the golden age. . . . How the lights in the city square were glorified, and the jazz strains from the orchestra a divine melody!

Then as I sat in this rapturous mood I was suddenly aware that a man at a near-by table was regarding me with interest. It was the friend of Rosemary's aunt, the Comte de Florac.

Monsieur de Florac had iron-grey hair and steel-grey eyes.

Also a metallic voice. His long, thin face was straight-featured, with a sensitive nose and a severely clipped moustache. For the rest, he was of medium height, and of a slender figure which he attired with conspicuous taste. An elegant man, every inch the aristocrat.

Punctilious politeness being the order of the day, I rose and shook hands with him.

"Won't you come and sit at my table?" said he. "That is, unless you are expecting someone."

"No, I'm waiting for the late train."

"I thought you looked a little lonely."

"I'm never lonely. My thoughts always entertain me."

"Then perhaps I interrupt a charming reverie?"

"Not at all. It's a pleasure to meet you again, monsieur."

"I would not have disturbed you, but I felt I particularly wanted to talk to you. You're going to Paris, you say?"

"Only for a day or two."

" Everyone else is *leaving* Paris. This malignant form of *grippe* seems to be spreading. But it's nice once in a while to get away from a provincial atmosphere. Look at those girls. Did you ever see such lymphatic lights of love? They're all so fat they look exactly alike – standardised by fat, as it were."

"Don't you think it's their profession that standardises them?"

"Perhaps. One sees the same expression in all their faces. One would conclude that there is a courtesan type of countenance. No doubt there are women specially designed for that sort of life. Well, we need not waste any pity on them. If we offered any of them an honest job scrubbing floors, she would refuse it with scorn."

"Yet nine girls out of ten would prefer to scrub floors."

"I think you put the proportion a little too high, but probably you're right. Most women have an instinctive sense of security, and these girls are doomed. Come back in five years from now and you will find all the faces changed."

"What becomes of them?"

"Some die in hospital; some lose their good looks and take to floor-scrubbing; a few marry and become concierges."

Then with a shrug Monsieur de Florac dismissed the subject. Fixing a monocle in his eye, he went on: "You've been here before, haven't you?"

"For two months, last summer."

"Two months in Clermont! How ghastly!"

"I was studying French. When I work hard, environment doesn't matter."

"Perhaps you would prefer if we spoke French?"

"Oh, no, monsieur. Your English is so perfect we'd better stick to that."

"It's not strange if I speak rather well. I lived twenty years in your charming country."

"In the States! Where?"

"In Alaska."

I was surprised. It was hard to believe that this polished cosmopolitan had spent so large a slice of his life in my virile Northland.

"I was brought up there," I told him. " I cut my milk-teeth on a gold nugget."

"That's why I wanted to have a talk with you. I knew your father."

I was a bit startled at this. "How strange!" I said.

"Strange! No. As a matter of fact we were business associates. Your father saved me from becoming a very rich man."

"He died a very poor one."

"Yes, he just escaped wealth. He induced me to give him an option on a quartz mine that afterwards made a fortune. He had to let it drop, however, and your Uncle Cyrus took it up. It was your uncle made the fortune."

"Would you mind telling me something about my father's death. I never could get the exact details."

"The same mine that might have made him wealthy proved his doom. They had been thawing out the bottom of the shaft with wood fires. Your father should have been told, but he was not. I don't know whose the fault was; anyway he descended into a pocket of gas and was asphyxiated. We all regretted him – even I whom he had persuaded to give an option on my mine. A very charming personality, and one of the best consulting engineers in the North. Most unlucky."

"Uncle Cyrus was the lucky one."

"Yes. My mine was his first success. After that he made fortune after fortune. His was the Midas touch. Timber, oil, steel, he had a go at each. The war doubled his wealth. To-day he has immense riches, yet is without health to enjoy them."

At this the Comte de Florac leaned forward and stared at me.

"Your cousin Rosemary is one of the richest of living heiresses, yet, sweet, simple child, she doesn't realise it. When her father dies she will have a power greater than that of a princess."

"But Uncle talks of giving away his wealth to charity."

"A *beau geste*. He would go down to posterity as one of the philanthropists of the age. A form of ambition, of egotism. *Mon Dieu!* If I had the wealth of Cyrus Quin I would be a colossus striding the globe."

A gleam had come into the steely eyes of the Comte de Florac. I was surprised. Could it be that this bored man of the world desired pomp and power? Up to now he had seemed to be merely a dabbler in the arts, content to enjoy an ample income. A little maliciously I said:

"He parted with a big bunch the other day, to found what they call a Stereotherapeutic Institute. Professor Hetz is at its head."

"I've no doubt he'll find no end of people to impose on him. Doctor Hetz had to resign his chair in the Sorbonne. An Alsatian."

Again I was surprised. The count's tone was so full of bitterness.

"Well, Uncle has his ideas," I said. "He told me he intends to get rid of every dollar during his lifetime, and die a poor man."

"In that case it would be a good thing if he died before it's all gone. The sooner, the better. To-morrow, for instance."

I felt a flare of irritation. Why was this man poking his nose into our affairs? He did not belong to the family.

"Perhaps, sir, you think we ought to assassinate him," I said.

"It wouldn't surprise me if someone did."

"Why? I don't suppose he has any enemies."

"Every millionaire has – those who envy him and those he has robbed."

I felt like asking, "Are you one of his enemies?" But I only said:

"Well, for my part, I hope Uncle Cyrus lives to be a hundred, and gives away every darned cent. Rosemary would be the last to worry, and I assure you I don't want anything.

Up to now Uncle's done everything for me; but if he cut off my allowance to-morrow I wouldn't complain."

"What he's done for you means nothing to him."

"It's meant a mighty lot to me, and I'm everlastingly grateful. But I say! While we're on the subject of the family, can you tell me anything of my mysterious Uncle Max?"

"Not very much. I never met him, and the other two didn't talk about him. A bit of a black sheep, I believe. After a stormy youth, in which his escapades got him into trouble time after time, he ran away from home, and for a year vanished completely. When next heard of he was in the Foreign Legion. After that he adopted the *métier* of a soldier of fortune. Later he transferred his activities to the Balkan States. Wherever trouble was, your Uncle Max seemed to scent it and make for it. I suspect, too, he did his share to stir it up. From time to time he disappeared, but when he emerged it was always at the storm centre. A strange, romantic figure."

"Has he been heard of in recent years?"

"Not since the beginning of the Great War. Some say he was the head of a spy system operating in Switzerland; some that he commanded a Turkish regiment in Gallipoli. In fact, there are all sorts of weird and sinister stories about him, from all of which he emerges the same stormy and threatening figure. After the war he vanished utterly. Perhaps he is buried in some forgotten battlefield; perhaps under another name gun-running in Morocco, rousing the Chinese to revolution or bolshevising India. But if he's doing anything you may be sure it's desperate and dangerous. A very fine man physically. All three brothers were big, handsome men – as tall and strong as you are. Indeed, they were so much alike you would have known them anywhere for brothers. But Max was the biggest and strongest of the three."

I listened eagerly to all this, for my Uncle Max had always appealed to me as one of the world's adventurers. In my youth I had pictured him, sword in hand, the blaze of battle in his eyes. Now, however, he must be over fifty, a grizzled veteran, scarred and war-wise. That is, if he was still alive.

"But enough of others," said the count, a smile lighting up his severe features, and giving to his face an expression of great charm. "Come, tell me something of yourself."

To be invited by a man of de Florac's distinction to talk

of one's self was flattering, and I forgot the resentment I had felt against him. Although I rarely smoke, I accepted a cigarette from a gold case and lit it.

"Well, sir, I've been rather anchorless up to now. Sort of a dud. But I'm going back home to make money in bunches."

The count laughed. He blew grey smoke from his lips, while I blew blue.

"Up to now you've preferred vagabondage to bondage."

"That's it. You see, after father died, I went to stay with mother's people. Her brother kept a trading post on the Porcupine, and my grandfather was an old schoolmaster; so that my education wasn't entirely neglected."

"You must have been lonely."

"Oh, no. I learned to hunt. Moose and bear. Then my grandfather had a library of old books, and I read and read. I devoured every volume I could lay my hands on. I've scarcely done any reading since. No, I've felt lonelier in the heart of a great city than ever I did beyond the Arctic Circle."

For a moment I was thoughtful, my mind back in a land of tameless tundra and virgin vastitude. I went on:

"Then Uncle Cyrus sent for me and put me to school in Seattle. I was there a year when I ran away. Couldn't stick the discipline. I joined a circus."

"That's what your aunt calls one of your escapades."

"I couldn't help it. Well, they found me and brought me back. Uncle Cyrus said nothing, but sent me to school again, in California this time. For a term or two I studied quite decently, then again I bolted. I became a hobo, and drifted to Wyoming, where I worked on a cattle ranch. I liked that immensely, but again the long arm of Uncle Cyrus reached out and hauled me back. He had given me more rope this time, and I was sure now I could settle down. He didn't reproach me."

"An excellent way to sow your wild oats."

"Maybe. But I was very repentant, and vowed it would be the last time. I really wanted to steady up. You see, it seemed as if there were two 'mes' – a serious one that loved books and ideas and art, and a tough guy caring only for change and excitement."

"We've all of us at least two men under our skins."

"The trouble with my two is they won't mix. The one

that wants to do something worth while in the world won't speak to the rough-neck. They fight who's going to get me."

"And was that your last escapade?"

"No. My third was the worst. Uncle had me coached and sent to Standford. I was there only two terms when again the devil entered into me. I shipped on a schooner for the South Seas. There I deserted and took to the beach. That was wonderful, and it was a year before I came to my senses. It seems like a dream, that year – as if it was somebody else, not I. I seemed to become a part of all I saw, fitted into the frame. I was a beachcomber with the best of them, yet as I loafed I learned. Then suddenly I sickened of it all. I looked at myself with disgust, and wrote to Uncle Cyrus telling him I was fed up with the rough stuff for good. I wanted to get back where I belonged, and asked him to kill the fatted calf."

"And did he?"

"Like a real man. He understands. He said he would make me an allowance, but would like me to go into business. I asked him for a little longer time. I wanted to go to Harvard and take some sort of a degree. He agreed. I've been there several terms, but I don't think I'll go on with it. I'm going to tell him I'm ready to become a business man. So that's all."

"No more adventures?"

"No, I'm through with all that foolishness."

"But perhaps when you're forty and have made a fortune, you'll be free to follow your own bent."

"Perhaps I will," I agreed eagerly.

"What would you do?"

"I don't quite know. Something in the writing game, maybe."

"For instance?"

"Well, I'm interested in sociology. I've been down in the gutter and know what the under-dog feels and thinks. Perhaps I could make a book along that line."

"I wish you luck. And now I must catch the last car back to Royat."

"And I my train to Paris."

As he moved away, straight as a spar, elegant, distinguished, looking at the world with arrogance, I muttered:

"Some aristocrat! Why did I let him make me talk about myself? I don't know whether I like him or not."

And it was with mixed emotion of doubt and uneasiness that I made my way to the station.

CHAPTER IV

THE DISSIMULATION OF MONA DALE

1

SEATED sleeplessly in the corner of a second-class compartment I had plenty of time for reflection.

For the most part, my thoughts turned to my coming interview with Uncle Cyrus; and now that the meeting was drawing closer, I rather funked it. It was strange, considering how big he bulked in my mind, how little I knew of him personally. Indeed, I had at most seen him only half-a-dozen times. So though it was easy in the atmosphere of Rosemary and Romance to feel assured to the point of insolence, with her receding every moment and him looming more portentously, I began to feel, to say the least, negligible. Yet the thought of Rosemary put fresh courage into me. For her I would have entered the cage of a lion.

And indeed there was something of the solitary lion in Cyrus Quin. A sick lion, even a gentle lion; but still in his patient suffering suggesting a spirit nothing could subdue. He had no friends and wanted none. As a man of forty, his private life had been austere and lonely, his public one stern and unbending. Now at sixty, from the remoteness of a sick-bed, he regarded mankind with pitying tolerance.

Thus unapproachable in the centre of that vast system he had created, he had become in the minds of men a figure Titanic but shadowy. Yet like a master of chess he still played his part in the world of affairs. If he had a purely human side he permitted few to get a glimpse of it. Of late years, however, a change seemed to have come over him, a sympathy with suffering of every kind. And only recently he had announced that he intended to leave his fortune to better the condition of his fellow men.

It was hard, then, to understand his treatment of Rosemary. As Cyrus Quin, Master of Industry, hard and harsh as iron, he had been idolatrously fond of her mother. Why, then, as Cyrus Quin of the changed heart, should he repulse

his daughter? It seemed inexplicable, and it made the task I had before me more complicated and difficult.

I often thought of my family; that is, of the Quins. My mother's people did not count. The families the Quins married into seldom counted. It was the name and the pure line of descent from somewhere in Ireland at the very beginning of things that mattered. A formidable family, as far as personalities went. An ancestor had been a Cardinal in the Vatican; another, a General under Count Tilly. It was said they had only men children, and this was strangely true. Rosemary was the exception that proved the rule.

Then from its solitary girl my mind went to the males of our family, my father and my two uncles.

What a strong trio they were! So alike physically, yet so different mentally. There was Magnus Quin, my father, brilliant, impulsive. Then my Uncle Cyrus, astute, tenacious, with a will of steel. Lastly Maximus, perhaps the strangest, strongest of the three. A violent man, they said; spurred by passion and scornful of restraint. Such a one was bound to be a filibuster, a trouble-maker. Where was he now? A Soviet General in Red Russia? Leading the yellow hordes in China? More probably rotting in an unmarked grave.

But though physically I looked like my father and my uncles, there the resemblance stopped. They were men of action; I a fumbler, a dreamer. If I had any definite desire, it was to do nothing definite. So far, my only stable enthusiasm had been an interest in the lives of tramps, jailbirds and prostitutes. I felt that none of the three brothers would have understood me. If it had been my paternal grandfather now – there was one who could have sympathised with me.

Sully Quin had been a Broadway actor in his day. I always pictured him as his last photographs showed him, a dour, disillusioned old man. He was finer looking than any of his sons; yet his face was lean and lined, his eyes bitter. It was the refined, ascetic face of the old-fashioned tragedian, at whose art modern audiences scoff. Even to the last he could not understand why Shakespeare played to empty benches, while a bedroom farce filled the house.

He had migrated to America after a training in the Legitimate, where he had supported men like Barry Sullivan and Osmond Tearle. He was full of pride of race, and among his cherished possessions were the records of a family that

had fought against Cromwell. For his failure he blamed the raw, crude country to which he had brought his talents.

His great fear was that his sons would follow in his footsteps. He need not have worried. If any of them possessed dramatic force they were not going to waste it on the creations of others. Still, they were a disappointment to him. Magnus he wanted to be a doctor, but my father elected to be a mining engineer. Cyrus was to have been a lawyer, but the world of business attracted him. As for Maximus, his father tried to induce that violent young man to enter the Church, but Maximus entered the army, and by a disreputable back door at that.

My grandfather did not live to see his sons attain to success. He believed them to be misguided, doomed to failure as he had failed. He died in the middle of the stage in the rôle of an aged manservant.

Poor old chap! How fine and remote he seems from those hectic days! As I read a book of clippings, faded, futile, my heart goes out to him. What parts he had played in his time! From Hamlet to Harlequin. Aye, perhaps even Harlequin.

2

After a night entirely wakeful, I arrived at the Gare de Lyon in the early hours; and, taking a room at one of the little hotels near the station, I slept till midday. By the time I had bathed, dressed, and lunched it was well on in the afternoon; so, perhaps with the idea of postponing an interview I was now beginning to dread, I decided to walk to my destination.

Uncle Cyrus lived in a private mansion on the Rue Martaban, gloomiest of streets that adjoins the Bois. The Villa Cæsar was a pretentious building in the Gothic style. It had two stories and an octagonal tower. Three long, narrow windows with diamond panes were set in this tower, and dominated the street, the avenue and the Bois itself. Here it was Uncle spent much of his time, looking out on the leafy vistas and the solitary streets.

A manservant answered my ring. He had a non-committal face, colourless, expressionless; yet at the sight of me he started.

"Why, Mister Harley! I hope you're well, sir."

"Thanks, Weast. Uncle in?"

"Yes, but he's resting. He told me he didn't want to be disturbed this afternoon."

"How is he?"

"Rather worse than better, sir."

"I'm sorry. I wonder if I could see him as soon as he feels he can stand the strain."

"He'll be surprised, Mister Harley, to know you're here. I'll tell him this evening if you like, sir."

"Good man, Weast. Break it to him gently. Say I'd like to have a talk with him to-morrow if he feels equal to it."

"Very good, sir. Shall I 'phone you?"

"No, I'll call in the forenoon."

Weast was a prize specimen of the perfect valet. A trim man of middle age and middle height, with dark hair slightly greying, and severe features, he lent an air of distinction to the household. You might be sure that anything Weast did was absolutely correct. A silent-footed, unobtrusive man, with a toneless voice, and a manner of respectful devotion. Such a servant was a comfort, a treasure, even an asset, and there was every reason to believe that Uncle Cyrus appreciated him.

I was going away, a little relieved if I must confess it, when I heard a clear voice.

"Why, Harley, for Heaven's sake! Where did you blow in from?"

A tall girl appeared. She had black hair drawn severely back, a high brow, large black-rimmed spectacles and a prim mouth. She was dowdily dressed in black.

"Hullo, Mona! I – I just dropped over for a week or two. How's everything?"

She gave me a hand with purple-tipped fingers, as if she had been changing a typewriter ribbon.

"I thought you were at Harvard. The term's not over yet. I was just thinking of mailing your quarterly cheque. However, since you're here, I'll make it out and get it signed to-morrow."

"No hurry, old girl. I'm comfortingly well heeled. Plain living, you know, if not high thinking. And Uncle's darned generous. I'd like to see the old chap, though."

Thoughtfully she tapped her front teeth with a pencil.

"You'll find a change in him, Harley. When did you see him last?"

"About a year ago. He was looking rather punk then."

"Well, he's not improved since. Frankly, I don't know if he'll be glad to see you. He has the idea you're at college and working to beat the band. He'll think it's another of your crazy stunts, and it'll upset him. Hadn't you better go back quietly on the next boat, and I'll say nothing about your visit?"

"No, it's important, Mona. You're a good friend, but you've got the wrong hunch this time. This is no wild escapade; on the contrary, I want to tell him I'm going to be good and eat out of his hand. I'm going to chuck Harvard and philosophy, for Detroit and paints and varnish. I'm going to be a regular business guy. Already I'm frightfully enthusiastic about it, and I can't begin too soon."

She looked at me rather hopelessly. I could see she really hadn't much confidence in me.

"Well, I'll try to fix up an interview for you to-morrow at eleven."

"Thanks ever so much. By the way, are you frightfully busy?"

"Earning my salary all right."

"I thought you might like to go to a show to-night."

"It's not often I get that chance. Yes, I would like to see a nice, naughty *revue*."

"Righto! We'll have dinner at some little dump in the Quarter. When shall I call for you?"

"I'm stacked up with work, but I might be ready by half-past six if I hustle."

"Ripping! I'll be round then."

Even as I reached the door I heard her wrestling with her Remington. Fine girl, Mona. She knew more about Uncle's affairs than any other one living. Discretion itself. Weast and Mona Dale, both ideal in their way. Uncle certainly knew how to choose the right sort of employees.

Although she was half a dozen years older than I, we had always been the best of friends. She was so brisk, so clear-headed. Too bad she lacked feminine charm. But that hair strained back and done in a knob behind! Those disfiguring glasses and that ill-fitting black gown! No fear of getting vamped there.

"A jolly good scout," I commented. "Pity she's so homely. Well, one thing – I don't need to tog up for her."

3

When I arrived, however, a few minutes late, I could have rubbed my eyes. It was a transformed Miss Dale I saw. She wore a dinner gown which, if not a creation of the Rue de la Paix, was a first-class copy of one. She had found time to have her hair marcelled, and her pale cheeks were delicately rouged. Without those owl-like glasses her eyes were clear and bright, while her lips parted in a pretty smile, instead of turning primly down. From a negligible girl she had become an arrestive one.

"Great Scott! Mona, you look swell. If I'd only known you were going to doll up like this I'd have donned my dinner jacket and taken you to the Café de Paris."

She laughed delightedly. "I am glad you like it. It's not often I put on my war paint."

"But why not? Why go about disguised as——"

"As a dowd. My dear boy, it's part of the job. Imagine your uncle with a young and beautiful secretary. Sick though he is, his reputation would be blasted. As a matter of fact, I got in the way of dressing like that before he had his stroke, and I kept it up. A man can't go gallivanting round Europe with an attractive stenog. without causing remark. As a spectacled girl in ill-fitting clothes, with my hair pulled back and a shiny nose, I was a harmless person of unquestioned chastity."

"I can't get over you, Mona. Doesn't Uncle suspect you're a butterfly disguised as a moth?"

"I don't suppose he notices me at all, especially since he's had to wear dark glasses. Why should he take any personal interest in me? I'm but a cog in the machine he controls."

4

We found a corner table on the terrace of a bizarre little restaurant on the Boulevard Montparnasse, where tiny trees in tubs screened us from the street. We had a small lobster,

poulet en casserole, salade romaine, glace panachée and a bottle of Moët et Chandon. It was evident that she was starved for entertainment; for her eyes sparkled and she seemed to enjoy every moment of the dinner. She was intensely interested in all she saw.

"Who are these queer people?" she asked, pointing to a group at a near-by table. The women wore short hair and dressed like men; the men wore long hair and were effeminately decorative in their attire.

"Probably some of the inspired geniuses responsible for the weird daubs on the walls of the interior."

"Are they Bohemians?"

"Soft-boiled ones."

"Where are the hard-boiled?"

"In Montmartre. Most people in this quarter play at being Bohemians. Especially Americans. They're temporary Bohemians. You have to go to the Butte to find the real article."

"How are the real ones different?"

"They're entirely unconscious of it. They don't know the meaning of the word. Here it's a pose. I don't like Montparnasse. Too many Americans. I don't like meeting my own countrymen outside of my own country. It destroys the feeling one is on a foreign soil. After all, though we consider ourselves the finest people on earth (and of course we are), there are things we can learn even from the French."

So we talked of national differences, criticising ourselves with great freedom, and it was only with the dessert that the conversation took a personal turn.

"So you think Uncle will see me to-morrow?"

"I hope so. He'll be glad when he hears you're tired of trifling with life. He believes a man should do his darnedest when he's young, and slack up later on."

"He doesn't seem in a hurry to slack up."

"He's in so deep he can't let go. He has interests all over the world."

"I wish he'd find me a job in France, then. But I suppose I've got to go back to God's country."

"You'd rather remain over here?"

"Rather. Wouldn't you?"

"No, little old New York for mine. You see, your uncle took up his residence here soon after the war, and he's never been back. I've lived in Europe ten years now."

"Still, I don't see why he can't quit. He must be rottenly rich. Is he still thinking of giving it all away?"

"He has already begun. Perhaps you read that he donated a big sum the other day to build and carry on a laboratory of research. The first thing they're going to do is to find a vaccine for this strange new *grippe* that is getting so alarming."

"Why does he vow he will dispose of every dollar during his lifetime?"

"He has a horror of making a will. There are lots of men like that. Besides, it would probably be contested. He has his domicile in France, and in this country a man can't leave his money as he wants. His heirs could claim a proportion. Besides, he has a prejudice against paying death duty. There are a few men like that too."

"You mean to say he has made no will?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Then suppose he were to die suddenly?"

"His estate would go to his next of kin, that is – after the State had its whack at it."

"Gee whiz! If I were his next of kin I'd feel like doing the old man in before he got rid of all that coin."

"That's curious. He's got the idea that somebody *does* want to do him in. To poison him, in fact. He has Weast taste all his food."

"Has he any enemies?"

"Every great capitalist has. He may be the gentlest of men, but indirectly he can't help hurting people."

"Tell me, is Uncle happy?"

"Not that you'd notice. Indeed, I should say he's one of the most miserable men alive."

"How queer! Why do you think that?"

"He broods eternally. He shuts himself off from the world."

"How long has he been like that?"

"Since the death of his wife. You know, he was crazy about her, and when he lost her they say he was like a madman. Even now he never mentions her name; and everything that might remind him of his loss is kept out of sight."

"Poor Uncle! She was beautiful, wasn't she?"

"I should say she was the most beautiful woman I ever beheld. I was only his stenographer, and I saw little of her then; but I remember her as a vision of loveliness. Your

uncle worshipped the ground she trod on. After her death he never was the same man."

"I believe," said I, feeling my way, "that his daughter promises to be as beautiful as her mother."

"His daughter! Oh, yes, I'd forgotten her. That kid must be coming on now. But how do you know?"

"I've met her. She's at Royat with her aunt."

"You don't say! And you know her?"

"Why not? Isn't she my cousin?"

"Of course. It seems funny though. You know, I've never heard your uncle speak of her."

"That's the strangest thing. He seems absolutely to ignore her existence. And if you knew what an adorable girl she is——"

Mona gave me a curious look. After a pause she said: "Yes, he seems to neglect her shamefully."

"And the poor girl is breaking her heart because of his neglect. She loves him, or rather her memory of him; but she hasn't seen him for five years. If he could only see her! I wonder is there no way of bringing them together?"

"I can't understand it," said Mona thoughtfully. "It doesn't fit in with what I know of your uncle. Formerly he was a man of no scruples, almost inhuman in the firmness and the isolation of his soul. But he's changed so much since his stroke. He appears to have no wish now but to do good in the world. I can't think of him as cruel and unjust. I'm talking to you freely because you're one of the family, but your uncle seems to be getting queerer and queerer. Why! for goodness sake, Harley, it's half-past nine, and you promised to take me to the Folies-Bergère."

5

So I whirled her off to a spectacle where the stage was as gorgeously adorned as the girls were gorgeously nude. Then, as she seemed unsated, we went to a Montmartre night restaurant, where we danced into the small hours. Once or twice I thought: "If it were only Rosemary!" But the idea of my cousin in that blazing, brazen *boit de nuit* revolted me. As I looked round at the faces of the concupiscent couples the thought of her innocence and purity filled me with thankfulness.

It was after two when I delivered Mona to the sleepy solicitude of Weast.

"You've given me an awf'ly glad time," she assured me.

"I've enjoyed it as much as you. We'll arrange another evening."

However, I determined I would do nothing of the kind. I liked Mona. She was a good comrade, but I had more to do than to dance to jazz.

I went to sleep thinking of Rosemary. The fear of losing her filled me with intolerable pain; the prospect of gaining her made me almost afraid. Again I seemed to hear her sweet voice, and my dreams were haunted by the divine wistfulness of her eyes.

CHAPTER V

THE SICK LION

When I arrived about half-past ten the following morning Miss Dale was again the crisp, efficient girl at whom no one would give a second glance.

"Hullo, Mona," I hailed cheerfully. "You look more prim than primitive this a.m."

"I'm right as rain. And you?"

"Fresh as paint, not to speak of varnish. What's the chance to view the big boss?"

"All O.K. I did a good line of talk for you. Told him you'd come to your senses. He seems pleased. Go and strike while the iron's hot."

Then with vicious energy she began to pound her typewriter. As I looked at her sallow face and pinched-in lips, I found it hard to believe she was the gay and giddy creature of that Temple of Jazz. Behind her spectacles her eyes had an inscrutable stare. Somehow I thought of the remark of the Comte de Florac about us all having a dual personality, and and wondered which was the true Mona, this or the other.

But Weast was waiting to show me to my uncle.

"He's in the Star Chamber," said the man, as he preceded me up the rich, gloomy stairway. Opposite a curtained door on the second floor he paused and knocked respectfully. After a longish time a muffled voice bade us enter.

The room in which I found myself was octagon in shape, with a very high ceiling. This ceiling was enamelled a dark blue, with what seemed seven stars of agate glass placed at intervals. The walls were painted a soft azure, and in one of the panels was set a high, bevelled mirror. The floor was of creamy mosaic.

There was no carpet, furniture nor decoration of any kind. Indeed, the place was bare as a cell; yet the effect of proportion and colour was pleasing. In the three sides of the octagon that composed the corner were long, narrow windows; and there, between them in a big wheeled chair, sat my uncle. Turning the chair half round, Weast silently vanished.

"How are you, Uncle?" said I, with forced cheerfulness, for the sight of him had given me something of a shock. He was wearing dark glasses which seemed to make sightless holes in a face of singular whiteness. Yet it was a face of extraordinary character. Someone once said that in my uncle were united the lofty brow of Napoleon and the high-bridged nose of Wellington, and it wasn't a bad description. But his large, flexible mouth drooped at the corners, and his head sagged forward. He wore a black velvet skull-cap that came down as far as the fiercely jutting eyebrows. He must have been a big man; for even now the long, lean lines of his frame were imposing under the blankets that covered him. His neck was muffled in a thick shawl.

He held out a limp left hand, speaking in a rasping drawl.

"Sit down, my boy. I'm still above ground, you see. I reckon I'll disappoint the worms a spell longer. I've found a doctor who seems to be doing me a power of good. In a few months I hope to be able to walk again. His treatment consists of massage, sun-baths and fresh air. I sit here in the sun as long as there is any, and breathe the pure air of the Bois. You see, there's nothing in this room to harbour microbes. I have a horror of microbes. War on the microbe, I say; that is, the evil microbe. The new laboratory I am establishing is to combat and confound the microbe. I've got a Doctor Hetz at its head, a wonderful man, quite a genius. After Professor Krug, of Geneva University, he's supposed to be the foremost bacteriologist in Europe. And the first thing we're doing is to beat that darned microbe that's killing so many folks right now – the Polish *grippe* as some call it."

Uncle Cyrus spoke with a middle-western twang. At present the voice that came from a mouth slightly awry was harsh and halting. His paralysed side was turned away from the light. I do not think his stroke had affected his face so much, but his right arm was rigid, and the fingers of the hand were twisted fantastically. The right leg must have been similarly affected. It was pathetic to see a big strong man, little past his prime, nailed to the chair of an invalid. Behind those stained glasses I could not tell the expression of his eyes, but I conceived it to be bitter and wearily sad.

"It's splendid of you, Uncle," I said, "to spend your money relieving the misery of mankind. There's so much to be done

in that line. There's cancer and consumption and——" I paused to think of other avenues in which we might frustrate the march of the microbe.

"Aha! my boy, we'll control them in time. Immunology is only in its infancy. We'll stamp out every form of disease that is due to bacteria. All I have made, and all I can make, is going to help."

"I am glad you can still carry on, Uncle Cyrus."

"Yes, my brain's as good as ever, though my body has failed me - temporarily, I hope. You don't care for money, do you?"

"As long as my modest needs are satisfied, I can do without a superfluity."

"Good job, my lad; for I don't intend to leave you any, not a darned cent. You'll have to make all you get. But if you want me to, I can put you in the way of making it."

"That's just what I do want. One has to earn money to enjoy it."

"Ha! Seems funny to hear you talk of earning money. What's got into you?"

"A little common sense, I hope. I realise now the folly of a purposeless life."

"Indeed! And what has made you realise that, Harley?"

"Oh, I suppose everyone does, sooner or later. One has duties to society, making a home, getting married——"

"Ah! I suspected it. There's a girl at the back of this. Well, I'm glad of it, my boy, and I'll help you all I can. I hope I'll live to see you safely married."

"Oh, Uncle, you're good for another twenty years."

"Maybe - if I die a *natural* death. But there are those who would be glad to see me go."

"No, no, you're doing too much good. You're a benefactor to society."

My uncle raised his head from his shawl, so that for an instant I saw his profile bold and clear. A fine head, made noble by suffering. A sweet patience now softened its rugged outline, and his lips parted in an expression gently serene. At that moment he seemed exalted.

"I hope to help humanity a little," he said softly. "To hasten on the millennium. That's my dream, these days, and I'm happy in that dream. It's all the happiness that remains to me."

He sighed, and once more his head drooped on his chest.

"When are you ready to go to work, Harley?" he demanded with a sharp change of tone.

"Right away, sir."

"The *Berengaria* leaves to-night. Catch it. Report at our New York office the day you land. We'll have you in harness at once."

I was taken aback. Hardly had I expected action so energetic.

"All right, sir. I guess I can manage."

"Of course you can manage. No more nonsense. You'll begin right at the bottom, and you won't be kept on a job one moment after you know it. I'll get monthly reports of you."

"Fine, Uncle. I don't know how to thank you."

"Thanks nothing. It's up to me. And it's up to you to make good. And now – who's the girl?"

Once more my uncle raised his head. He was regarding me with an expression of much benevolence. I drew a deep breath. The dreaded moment had come. Swallowing hard, I began:

"She's an American, sir. The sweetest girl in the world."

"Humph! They all are when we first love them."

"But she's different, absolutely different. We both fell in love at first sight. She's as beautiful as an angel, and as good as she's beautiful."

"Is she of good family?"

"I think, sir, you would approve of her family."

"New York people?"

"Yes, Uncle."

"Better and better. I suppose then, young man, you want to marry this treasure of a girl?"

"Yes, Uncle."

"When?"

"As soon as possible."

"Pah! You'll have to wait till you can pay her board bill. That is, unless she has money of her own. Has she?"

"Her father has money."

"A rich man's daughter, eh! And suppose he refuses to let his girl marry a poor one?"

"I should be infinitely sorry, sir."

"What would you do?"

I hesitated a moment. Then: "I believe I'd marry her, anyway."

"And would she tie herself to a pauper?"

"She would to me, sir."

"Bravo! I begin to like your girl, Harley. Is her father very rich?"

"So they tell me, sir."

"Ho! daughter of a wealthy New Yorker. Do you suppose I know him?"

"I think you do, sir."

I was fast losing my nerve, stammering miserably. How I wished I had told the old man in writing!

"So I know him. In that case I might drop a word in his ear. Time was when few men were not open to my suggestions, and I reckon they'll harken still."

"There might be other objections than that of wealth, sir."

"What could there be," snapped my uncle. "Are you not my nephew, young, healthy, good-looking? You've played the fool up to now, but back of it I feel you're good stuff. You've got brains a-plenty, and energy and enthusiasm. I'd like to see the man that would not be proud to have the nephew of Cyrus Quin for a son-in-law. I'd make him sorry. I'd break him. Tell me, who is her father?"

I was silent for such a long moment that he repeated sharply: "Come, come! Who is her father? Are you ashamed of him?"

I stood before my uncle, squared my shoulders and looked him straight in the face.

"No, sir. I'm proud of him. He's a just and honourable man, and I'm sure he won't stand in the way of his daughter's happiness."

"Well, who is the man? Who is the father of this wonderful girl?"

"*You are, sir.*"

There! I had said it. And now that it was out my courage returned. I looked at uncle fearlessly, set my lips and waited. I could hear my heart beating heavily. . . . Oh! I thought that silence would never end. At last it was broken by uncle, and I was startled by the hoarse, strained note in his voice.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, Uncle, the girl is my cousin Rosemary. We met

last summer in Royat and fell in love. Time has only strengthened our feelings, till now we have but one thought, to marry."

"*Rosemary!*"

The old man's left hand went to his throat as if he were choking. He was staring at me in such a dazed way. I felt afraid for him. Once again he gasped: "Rosemary!"

I was amazed. I had expected a display of feeling, but not this emotion. I sensed something terrible behind it. My uncle was now gazing at me with a look of horror. What could it mean? In any case, it stung me.

"What's the matter, sir? Why do you look at me like that?"

As if by a great effort he spoke. "Harley, you *can't* marry Rosemary."

"Why?"

His voice rose almost to a shout. "Don't ask me, boy; but you can't, you can't."

"But why, sir? You must have a reason."

He was silent. He seemed to have collapsed. His head drooped till it almost touched his helpless arm. There was something pitiful about him.

"I'm sorry, Uncle, to upset you," I faltered; "but I can't be put off like that. Is it because we're cousins?"

"No, it's not because you are - cousins."

"Then what? Rosemary is a healthy girl. There's no hereditary taint."

"No, no."

"Well then. You speak as if she might be a leper. Please, Uncle, I insist on knowing. Come what will, I intend to make Rosemary my wife."

Once more Uncle Cyrus raised his face, and I saw that it was convulsed by an indescribable expression of horror.

"Forgive me, Harley. You shall judge. Now I'm going to tell you something I never thought to reveal to a soul. Come close. Even walls can hear. Listen. . . ."

The old man whispered in my ear. . . . With a cry like a man who has received a dagger-thrust I started back.

"No, no! It isn't true!"

"As God hears me."

We two stared at one another. A full minute passed; then I said in a voice that sounded like a sob:

"It's – it's tragic."

"Tragic! that's the word. Somehow I feared for this. I tried to keep you apart. It's the irony of fate. You must go away. Never see her again."

"But – can't I explain?"

"No, no. You must keep my secret. Promise me, however hard it is, you'll keep my secret. It will seem cruel, but it will be the best in the end. People forget. Oh, yes, they do. Time heals everything. There's no such thing as a broken heart."

"What about yours, Uncle Cyrus?"

"That's different. The young bear scars, the old carry open wounds to the grave."

"But – I must tell her, Uncle. I must——"

"No, no. There's our pride of name, my honour, the honour of the dead. Keep silent, Harley. Try it for a little, my lad. Don't write. Don't communicate in any way."

"I'd rather she thought me dead."

"Perhaps she will. Better even that. . . . And you might have married her. Think! the horror of it."

"Yes, the horror——"

"Oh, why did you come to torture me. It's this that's killing me slowly. Brooding night and day over this. On her deathbed she confessed. . . . Oh, God! my wife! my wife!"

With a groan he fell forward, and the dark glasses dropped from his closed eyes.

PART II

THE PURPLE PEST

CHAPTER I

A RAT LOSES ITS BREAKFAST

1

BIR-R-R!

At the clamour of my cheap alarm-clock I opened my eyes to reproachful sunshine.

How well I was feeling! But for six successive nights had I not gone to bed superlatively sober! Had I not given the gang at the Dôme the frozen front, sitting morosely apart while they worked the adjective "interesting" overtime. Ah! what a fool I had been making of myself these two months past.

A week had gone by since I had entered the apartment of the professor, and I was still stupefied by that experience. Although I had kept a close watch, I had seen nothing more of the old man. I hardly knew what to make of it. There were moments when it seemed the fantasy of a drink-disordered brain; others when I stood appalled at the horror of a plot so devastating.

Should I tell my story to the police? It sounded so fantastic. If only I had been sober at the time! But the fact that I was not would discredit me. The more I considered the less I felt inclined to take any action. Yet my conscience gnawed at me. Each day I scanned the paper for fresh news of the malady, but for three days there had been no mention of it.

So on this morning of sunshine that seemed to mock my gloomy forebodings I reached out of bed and gathered together the latest sheets of my great novel, *Garbage*. Frowningly I read them over. I was so engaged when I heard a ring at the bell of the apartment. Descending in pyjamas I found that a long, brown envelope had been pushed under the door. It looked ominous.

Standing in a patch of sunlight, I read the letter. It was as I feared. "The Editor of *Stunning Stories* regrets, etc." Not a word of interest or encouragement. With an air of disillusion I looked at the manuscript of my short story,

"Linked by Fat." It was a tale of two martyrs of obesity who, after various humiliating experiences in the pursuit of love, come together and realise that they can sympathise with each other. From sympathy is begotten affection, and the final fade-out leaves them cooing and consuming spaghetti.

"The happy ending," said I, "is a mistake. Unworthy of the Serious Novelist. Could I not make one of them diet, then from the standpoint of comparative slimness despise the other? The woman succeeds in reducing, the man cannot. Despair! She urges him, taunts him. She has got down to a hundred and forty pounds; for him it must be a hundred and seventy or break. Imagine his struggles, his self-denial, his daily trip to the weighing-machine. Finally, after a heroic effort, he succeeds. But he falls ill. Full of joy at the thought of his triumph, she nurses him. Alas! during his convalescence he gains thirty pounds. Tragedy! Renunciation! A lingering farewell! . . . I might change the title, call it ' The Fate of Fat.' Yes, I believe I'll do it that way."

The æsthetic part of me tempted me to go back to bed, the better to incubate this new theme; but the energetic part of me protested. Throwing off my pyjamas, I began that series of physical jerks I meant some day to publish under the title of "Strafe the Suet."

"Too bad about that rejection," I meditated between exercises. "Funds are getting low. A cheque would be welcome. Well, some day they'll come begging me for contributions. 'Dear Mr. Quin, we're getting out a special Thanksgiving Number, and feel it would not be complete without something from your pen ' . . . or : 'My dear Quin, with regard to our conversation last night at the Bildorf *re* the moving picture rights of your new novel.' . . . That's the sort of stuff they'll be slinging me before I'm through."

I finished my exercises by sloshing myself with a wet towel. "Darn that editor!" I muttered. "I'll never send him another story. Perhaps I'll have better luck with the English magazine, *Tip-Top Tales*. But my story's such an unusual one."

I referred to my manuscript "Bad Breath." It related the domestic tragedy of a loving couple who become estranged owing to the husband's affliction of halitosis. He has all the virtues, but his breath is bad. She loves him, but in the end

she has to leave him, owing to her overpowering nausea every time he breathes on her. A human and harrowing tale, related with relentless realism. Yes, I had hopes of "Bad Breath." So far, with the exception of *Garbage*, it was the best thing I had done.

I stropped my razor, lathered my chin, began to shave. . . . Well, if *Tip-Top Tales* shot it back at me I'd put them, too, on my black list. I had dozens of yarns to tell, only that was small shot. My big gun was my novel, *Garbage*. It was to be the study of a woman's soul – sad and sordid like life. I had no use for exciting action, neat plot, dramatic climax. (Scrape! Scrape!) No, that was all bunk. Not art. I was a Normalist. I wanted to take the stuff of life and slap it, quivering, on my page. (Here I managed to cut myself, which with a safety razor takes some doing.) There must be nothing in one's work beyond normal experience of everyday existence. A fig for the popular fictionmonger pandering to the mob. Never would I descend to such depths of literary infamy. My books would be human documents. What did I care for the tricks of the trade: suspense, surprise, climax. My work would be ruthless in its reality, trenchant in its truth. I would probe the human soul, drag its ugly passions to the light. People might shrink, but, fascinated, they would read on. In vain they would look for sloppy love-scenes. Never would I blazon the bookstalls, make books for boneheads. . . .

Well, at twenty-three we are all idealists and believe in ourselves. At that moment I did profoundly. Later on I might fall into line, but for a few years of illusion I would be true to my own soul.

2

Would I wear my blue suit or my grey? Being a blue day my grey seemed more appropriate. It fitted easier than when I first bought it. Losing weight. Must pay more attention to my diet. They said horseflesh was very sustaining. It looked a little dark, but no doubt it tasted all right. Labourers lived on it, and half the time it was horseflesh they gave you in the cheap restaurants. I wonder if I went to the Cochon d'Or and demanded a *bifteck à cheval* what they would say? Well, if something didn't turn up soon, I'd be obliged to take my

meals in the studio. That would be rather fun, and it would give me more time to work. Oh, I loved work. Yes, by gosh! I – loved – work.

For a moment I opened the window to bid Paris good morning. What a gorgeous view! This must be one of the highest houses in the city. Am I not lucky to live in the highest room in the highest house in all Paris? And in the shadow of the Pantheon, too. That should inspire me. Think of all these great ones resting peacefully below me. I must try to be worthy of the Immortals whose ashes repose so near.

Wonder what's become of the professor? I sometimes used to see the old bird leaning over his balcony. He had hands like claws, big-veined and glazed with age. . . . I must have dreamt all that stuff about him and his precious microbe. Or else he's an old madman. Yet I haven't seen him for a week.

As I passed the lodge of the concierge on the way out, Cecile, her eighteen-year-old daughter, ran after me.

"Monsieur Queen, I wanted to tell you that mother will not be able to do your *ménage* to-day."

"Dear me, Cecile! Nothing wrong, I hope?"

Looking at her more closely, I saw that she had been crying.

"Tell me, Cecile, what's happened?"

"They've taken her to the hospital. She was very sick yesterday. Vomiting, couldn't get her breath; so I got a doctor of the Quarter. Then last night two doctors of the Government came and took her away in an ambulance."

"You don't tell me!"

"Yes, I pray it's not this new kind of *grippe* that's going round. They say it's so dangerous; worse than the kind we had the last year of the war."

"Oh, no, Cecile. Don't worry. It's sure to be nothing like that."

"I wish I thought so, Monsieur Queen. You don't know how I fear. If anything happens to my mother, what will become of me? I have no one else."

I looked at her thoughtfully. In her anæmic Parisian way she was appealing. Yes, what would happen to her if she was left alone? Already I knew enough of Paris to realise what happens to girls of her type. They are not strong enough for domestic service and in the workshops they can earn only

the barest living. They are forced to take a protector, and from that to the streets is a matter of time. Poor Cecile! She had good reason to cry her eyes out.

"I'll clean your studio while mother is sick," she went on.

"That's good of you. Don't bother, though. I can fix up things for myself."

"It will be a real pleasure, Monsieur Queen."

"All right, Cecile. But I hope it won't be for long. Don't worry. Everything will come out all right."

"Poor kid!" I thought, as I went away. "She's really a nice little thing, surprisingly slim and dainty. Well, I hope the old lady gets over her trouble quickly."

Then I remembered the remarks of a chap in the Dôme the night before.

"Darned queer, this new brand of *grippe*. Seems to take people all of a sudden and simply put them out of business. They're fighting-fit one moment, and the next hard-headed for the bone-yard. Some think it's a kind of pneumonia, but it's very infectious. People turn purple and die in forty-eight hours. Die mighty hard, too. Queer the papers don't say more about it. Seems like they wanted to hush it up.

"Well, it's to be hoped it won't turn into an epidemic like they had in Poland last summer. If it's anything like that, me for the good old U.S.A. I'm no quitter, but I'm not taking any chances on that sort of thing."

3

Swinging round the sunlit square of the Pantheon, I descended in the direction of the Seine. As I passed the mildewed and melancholy Halles des Vins I reflected on the cheer for a million bottled and barrelled in those gloomy vaults. As a would-be writer, a knowledge of wines should be part of my equipment, but the education is an expensive one. So, deciding that for the moment I must forgo it, I crossed the Seine by the bridge below Notre Dame.

I never can pass the Cathedral without pausing in reverent contemplation. Once in the New York Museum I paused for a whole afternoon in front of a model of it, dreaming of the days when I would sit in its shadow. Perhaps the dream was fairer than the reality; but I hope I will always halt to feast my eyes on Notre Dame. Perhaps it was Hugo made me take

such an interest in it. Poor old Victor! Mountain of pumice stone!

Crossing to the right bank, I descended to the river. It was my habit to walk along the deserted quays in the early morning. Sometimes I would go as far as the Pont Neuf; then in a little bar near the Halles I would buy a cup of coffee and a roll. Having thus breakfasted, I would return to my studio and tap my typewriter till noon.

So now, as I strolled along close to the water, I fell to pondering over my novel, *Garbage*. The theme was the life of a woman doomed from her birth to infamy. Born of drunken parents in a caravan, she was to survive through a childhood of hunger, dirt and cold; become what it was inevitable she should become, and die in her teens – demanding the meaning of it all.

It was to read like the life history of such a girl, or rather it was to be a composite of the life history of a dozen such girls. It was to be typical and authentic, a Manon Lescaut without the romance, a Sappho without the guilt and passion. In one drab, relentless chronicle it was to crystallise the tragedy of such sordid lives.

But the trouble was, I lacked the documentation. There were times when I stood for hours on the Quay d'Horlage, in front of that saturnine pile, the Conciergerie. There through a gloomy tunnel the girls of the city went to get their permits renewed. All day long in a steady stream they would come, hundreds of them. Some would drive up in taxis, and enter with a rustle of silk; others slink in carpet slippers with their heads bare. Some were in their teens with their hair down their backs; others ancient hags scarred by decades of battle. Some had an air of modesty, some of effrontery. Some were flashy and raddled with paint, others pale and dressed with quiet taste.

Often I was surprised as I would pursue with my eyes a demure, sweet-faced girl in black, only to see her turn into that dark doorway. Or another time it would be a bold-eyed wench in an orange sweater, rouged and bobbed, who would . . . pass with a glance of disgust. I learned to distrust my judgment a little.

As a rule, though, they were true to type, snippings on the scrap-heap of life. By nature they were lazy, vain, pleasure-seeking – but how many of their respectable sisters are all

that! Unfortunately for these they had been born in poverty. Yet they deserved little sympathy. Not many were really vicious, perhaps, but most were sensual and ease-loving.

So at least I judged them, watching that endless procession between the wine-dark Seine and the lowering Conciergerie. And those who arrived in their autos and those who came in slippered feet seemed sisters the moment they entered that dark portal. That was the strange part of it. The moment they stepped over that fatal threshold all airs and graces dropped from them. The Democracy of the Damned! In satin or in rags, sisters of a common shame!

And now I had arrived at a point in my masterpiece where a knowledge of their lives was absolutely necessary. And I absolutely lacked that knowledge. So I was turning the matter over in my mind and trying to see some way out, when I noticed running along the quay in front of me a gaunt grey rat.

It was a very veteran of a rat, huge and hoary, scarred and ravenous. I watched it scuttle along, then disappear behind a heap of stones. Approaching softly, I peered over, and again I saw my rat. It had not heard me, apparently, or it was too busy to notice me. It had found a large parcel, and was engaged in gnawing its way through the wrapping paper. For a moment I regarded it, but as I made a further movement it gazed at me with beady eyes and scurried reluctantly away.

I remained, however, looking at the parcel. It was bound with stout cord, and the wrapping was of a kind of tar-paper toughened with cotton fibre. An interesting parcel!

Merely out of curiosity I bent down and unloosened the string. It was easy to slip it off, and I did so. Then I proceeded to unwrap the carefully folded paper. The next moment I started back with horror.

The mysterious parcel contained an amputated human arm.

I was still staring in shocked bewilderment, when from above I heard shrill cries of excitement. They were uttered by two women who were looking down from the street. All I could do was to point to my ghastly find. I saw now that it was a very emaciated arm, shrivelled and yellow, evidently that of a very old man. The hand was like a claw, with swollen veins and the glaze of age.

While I was observing thus, I was joined by the women. They were of the type who perambulate pushcarts.

"Ah! my poor little monsieur!" said the stouter of the two. "We beheld it all. Were we not watching that rat - such a big one! When we saw it run to the parcel we wondered what was inside. Then we beheld you open it. Oh, la! la! My poor little monsieur! What horror!"

Yet there was something ecstatic in their emotion. What had happened would make them a centre of interest in the highest circles of Pushcartdom. They might get their names, aye, even their pictures, in the papers. And as if in answer to their excited outcry others were eagerly hurrying to the scene. Soon there were a dozen, then a score round that ghastly arm.

"Fetch a policeman," suggested a voice.

But no one wanted to move; and when at last two *sergeants de ville* loomed majestically on the scene, there must have been sixty spectators crowding and craning to get a look. Now was my chance. I did not want to be mixed up in this gruesome affair, to be called as a witness, and so on. So, profiting by the general distraction, I slipped away.

CHAPTER II

THE CRISPNESS OF JESSAMY BYNG

1

"I AM a Serious Novelist," I would say, in one of those imaginary interviews I had with myself.

"As a writer of Realistic Fiction, Imagination has no part in my equipment. Its place is taken by observation. Observation plus Experience. Above all, Experience. Get it, make it."

Alas! there was the case of the demoiselles of perdition, whose lives were to illumine my great novel, *Garbage*. Behold me utterly lacking in that sinister knowledge which alone would avail me. Experience of them I had none. Imagination offered to come to my aid, but sternly I repulsed it.

"Avaunt!" I would say. "My work shall mirror common, everyday life. There shall be no action, no drama, no sensation."

"But," my imaginary listener might object, "everyday life is full of action, drama, sensation. Any copy of the morning paper will prove it."

"That is exceptional," I would reply. "These things are extraordinary. They don't happen to you and me. They never happen to most people. As for fantastic adventures, outside the 'shocker' they don't exist. No, that sort of thing is unworthy of a Serious Novelist."

Yet in the midst of these smug convictions, here were things happening to me that outraged all probability, adventures as fantastic as any in the latest thriller that brightens the book stalls. Can it be wondered, then, I returned to my studio in a mood of disgust?

The sight of that gruesome arm came between me and the thousand words I meant to write before noon. It gave me an uneasy, morbid feeling. Curious, but my novel, the very essence of realism, did not seem real any more. Something

had happened to me that shouldn't have happened. But it *had* happened. Had I not banished the improbable from my scheme of things, and here it was, thrusting forward its fantastic face? Sensation, that very quality I had denied to life, was insolently invading it.

So raging inwardly I gained the studio. Everything seemed against me. First, there was my concierge and her sudden illness. Then this affair of the severed arm. It only needed a third distraction to utterly spoil my day. And on reaching home I found it.

Cecile was in the midst of doing my *ménage*. I greeted her absently, hoping she would go away soon. But she seemed in no hurry. Once I thought I would tell her about what I had seen on the quay, but I decided she already had enough that was morbid on her mind. So with impatience ill-concealed I waited for her to finish.

How she fooled about, always finding something fresh to do. And there was really so little to do. Unnecessary all that fuss and flutter. Had she not made my bed, cleaned my window, polished my floor! Now she was meticulously dusting. Her mother never did as much in a week. Once or twice I wondered if she wasn't *making* work. I fumbled with my papers, put a clean sheet in my typewriter, looked at her wistfully. Would she never go?

And strangely enough as I looked, the thought came to me that she was really a very pretty girl. Funny it hadn't struck me before! She was slender, with a porcelain purity of skin that suggested delicate health. Tuberculosis! She didn't look as if she'd live to be thirty. Poor kid! Her face had a clear pallor, and those violet shadows under her eyes gave them a poignant appeal. They were grey eyes, rather brilliant. Her lips were pale, her cheeks faintly hollow.

Her simple black dress which had been made by her own hands, fitted just as gracefully as if it had been done by a great dressmaker. She was thin-necked, flat-breasted. Her hands were small, her ankles fine. In her quick, dainty movements she reminded me of a bird. A brave little soul. . . . But darn it! Would she never have done? Sitting before my typewriter I watched her gloomily. There! Thank Heaven! She had finished at last.

"I'm going now, monsieur. I hope I haven't forgotten anything."

"Oh, no, everything's lovely. Thank you so much."

"Not at all. I like housework. I'd rather stay at home and keep house than go to the shop. I'll come to-morrow."

"You're too nice."

"But no! . . . I'm afraid I'm keeping you from your work. How clever you must be to write. I wish I could understand it."

Good gracious! Was the girl trying to make conversation? If she didn't go soon I'd chase her away. In despair I struck the keys of my machine, pounding out the first sentence that came into my head:

This girl is a blamed nuisance

To my dismay she came over and looked at what I had written. Thankfully I remembered she couldn't understand a word of it. She tried to read it though, pronouncing the words in the French fashion.

" 'Thees geerrl ees aw blaamaid nooeesaunce!' What does it mean?"

"It means you are a lovely little woman."

"Oh no! . . . Give it to me, please."

She tried to take the sheet, but I held her hands. There was a little struggle. . . . Then I scarcely know how it happened, but I had drawn her down on my lap and was kissing her. Once in my arms she seemed to grow limp. Such lack of resistance alarmed me, so I rose to my feet and released her.

"There now, little friend, go or I'll kiss you again."

She went away with head bent. She seemed all confused, trembling. After the door had closed on her I sat down to my machine but nothing could I write.

"I shouldn't have done that," I muttered. "It mustn't happen again. Poor *gosse*! I suppose I was sorry for her, mother ill and all that. She's so lonely. Gosh! it's pleasant to kiss a girl once in a while. Lips that cling and the flutter of a little heart! Not since . . . but hell! I mustn't think of that. Now to work, to work. . . ."

Then after another effort I threw myself down on my bed.

Another dud day! One damn thing after another! Everything against me! Again, confound that girl! . . . Shouldn't have done it. . . . Bloody fool! . . .

2

I was aroused by the announcing of noon from three different steeples. Very delightfully each waited for the other to finish; then chimed in quite another key as if to say: "See how much better I can do it." Who could resist that triple appeal? I resolved to go to lunch.

As I circled the ponderous Pantheon, the Law College was disgorging a stream of students, and the little streets about the Sorbonne seethed with them. On the Boul' Mich' the cheap restaurants were already crowded with hungry humanity. One heard every language spoken, – even including French.

I passed through the student belt, however, and crossing the Seine entered the zone of the markets. I happened to know a little restaurant where portions were generous and prices were low; where the crockery was coarse but the cuisine copious. Saw-dust sprinkled the floor, but lusty life sat at one's elbow. Lunch was my one square meal, so daily I sought the Cochon d'Or.

To-day, however, I was a little late, and the place seemed already filled. I was going away when the paunchy little *patron* bustled up.

"Only one seat remains, monsieur. Come, I will show you."

I followed him, and with a pleased smile, as much as to say: "There! have I not beautifully arranged it?" he pointed to a vacant chair at the last table of all. Then I saw that on the other side of the table was seated a Female Compatriot.

Now I am peculiar enough to have a prejudice against my own country-women out of my own country. One should, it seems to me, cultivate the ladies of the land one lives in, otherwise one could never get to know them. And when they happen to be the most attractive feature of the land this duty is emphasised. The more of French women I saw, the more I liked them. They were so deliciously feminine; they made a fellow feel he was a little tin god: there was a suggestion of frailty about them that means more to a man than the most determined virtue. No, as I shot a quick glance at this girl in a shabby frieze raglan, a simple felt hat, ribbed woollen stockings and flat-soled shoes, I felt that I was not exactly crazy to know her.

And now this podgy little *patron* was leading me up with

the pleased air of bringing together two sympathetic souls. I would have retreated, but the eyes of the girl were on me, and in them I fancied a gleam of amusement. With a little embarrassment I took the seat opposite her.

"Will madame permit?" said the *patron*.

"Madame permits," said the girl.

She had finished her meal and was smoking cigarettes among the debris. She knocked an inch of ash into the saucer of her coffee cup, blew a ring of smoke towards me and remarked:

"Oh, you brave and noble soul!"

"Eh! I beg your pardon."

"You are, you know you are."

"I – I don't understand."

"You're brave because you're shy, yet you mustered up courage to take this seat. You're noble because you've taken pity on a poor lone female."

I was too disconcerted to reply quickly.

"Oh, I know," she went on. "You're a nice boy who wouldn't speak to a girl unless he'd been properly introduced. Well, I'll introduce myself. My name's Jessamy Byng. 'Miss' if you please, and spell it with a 'y.' Originally it was plain B-i-n-g, but Pa made a stake in oil and decided it was more high-toned to spell it with a 'y.' Now, what's your name?"

"Quin, Harley Quin."

"How perfectly quaint. Your friends should call you Harlequin."

"They do."

"You're not my notion of a Harlequin. He should be slim, volatile, flashing, and dashing all over the scene. You're too tall and husky for the part. Besides, I'm sure you're a very serious, sober young man."

"Am I?" The waiter was standing at my elbow, and to cover my confusion I studied the wine card with the air of a connoisseur. Although I could ill afford it I ordered a half bottle of Barsac.

"I see you're not so sober as I thought. Look at me – I drink only Vittel. I never drink alcohol except when I'm in the United States. Out of my own country I'm a patriotic American. I observe its laws on foreign soil but defy them at home."

"That's how I feel," said I. "I don't smoke, but if they ever prohibit tobacco I'll become a cigarette fiend. All right, waiter, I'll take the chicken *sauté*."

"Not a bad inspiration. I got a wing and wish-bone in mine. Say, let's wish."

She held out a prong of the wish-bone and snapped off the bigger portion. "There! I got it. Well, I wish to our better acquaintance. That's nice of me, isn't it?"

"Mighty nice."

She threw back her head with a laugh that showed a sparkling aggregation of teeth. "You don't mean that. I'm an awful person, ain't I? Don't bother handing me out a line of polite protestation. Here's your chicken *sauté*, and by Christopher! if you haven't got a drumstick as well as a bit of the breast. How do you work it? You must have a stand-in with the cook."

"They know me. I come here quite often."

"It's not a bad little dump. I come here to be alone and get away from the crowd. I don't mind you. Might as well be alone as with you. You're so restful. What's your line?"

"I'm an author."

"What do you author?"

"Books, chiefly."

"Have I read any of 'em?"

"Not yet. I haven't released any of my masterpieces."

"Too bad. Say, Bill (I'm going to call you Bill), walking through the Luxembourg this morning, I saw something that might have inspired you. It was a parcel lying at the bottom of the Fontaine de Medicis. . . . I stares at it a bit, then calls the little soldier-boy out of his sentry-box. He pokes at it with his bayonet. The paper rips open. . . . *Sapristi!* What do you think we see? A leg, a human leg."

I gazed at her in amazement.

"You look surprised. Pah! it made me sick. It was the leg of a very old man. Shrivelled and spindly it was. Someone's been assassinated and carved in pieces. We'll see something about it in the morning papers. But say, boy! I've got to get a move on. Got a class in the nude at Julian's. Hope I'll see you here to-morrow. If I arrive first I'll keep a pew for you, and you'll do the same for me. *Au revoir*, Bill."

She was gone breezily, leaving me wordless. Confound her! how I had let her dominate the conversation. I must have

seemed a dumb-bell. She looked a healthy creature. Her cheeks had a grained freshness, the weathered look of an open-air girl. Not bad-looking either, though she seemed to prefer comfort to coquetry. Somehow she gave the impression of crispness. Her bobbed hair was crisply curled; she had a crisp upper lip, and a nose that started out to be Grecian, but got discouraged by that lip and came to a brusque arrest. She moved with snap and decision, and the hand she gave me felt crisp and cool. Yes, there was something very crisp about Miss Jessamy Byng. I hoped I would see her again.

Well, her example of industry inspired me. I decided to go to the studio and do some work. As I passed the lodge of the concierge I avoided looking in, so thoroughly did I feel ashamed of what I had done in the morning. I almost hated Cecile. I never wanted to see her again.

I was taking off my jacket when I happened to put my hand in the pocket. With an exclamation of disgust I drew something forth. It was the string of that beastly parcel. I must have put it there unthinkingly.

I regarded it more closely. It looked like window cord.

"I should hand this over to the police," I pondered. "It might be a clue. But it's rather late now. It would be awkward for me. Fortunately I've told no one, so I'll just keep on keeping my mouth shut. I wonder what they'll say about it in the evening papers?"

Throwing it down on the table, I confronted my typewriter and tried to switch my mind on to work. But my mind refused to be switched. The sheet of paper in front of me remained blank, while my eyes kept wandering to that piece of cord.

At last I rose and rummaged around till I found a small but strong magnifying glass. Taking up the cord I examined it inch by inch. It was tied with a knot I remembered from my sailor days. I did not disturb this, but continued to peer closely through the glass. Finally I got a pair of tweezers and plucked something very fine from the cord that formed the knot. Laying it carefully on a sheet of paper I again examined it.

"I may be mistaken," I said at last; "but this looks to me like a hair from the fur of a yellow cat."

CHAPTER III

THE CAFÉ OF QUEER PEOPLE

1

DESPITE my desperate efforts, that afternoon my great novel, *Garbage*, did not advance.

It was disconcerting, profoundly so. Imagine a young Realist, a convinced believer in the prose of life, suddenly confronted with its romance. Fancy a would-be Gissing whose faith in the Ordinary is profound, all at once faced with the Fantastic.

In the work of the Normalist school you will search in vain for men cut up in morsels. Their heroes never discover severed arms. Such things savour of cheap drama. I frowned on drama. But could I continue to frown on it if it insisted on thrusting itself into my life? Could I write realism and live romance?

This then was the problem with which I found myself faced, and as I paced the studio in a state of exasperation it seemed that Fate was playing a pretty prank on me. I had a feeling that anything might happen now. A man cut in morsels! What a banal beginning! After that, let sensation strut unashamed, coincidence function overtime, action run riot. Aye, let fantasy itself take possession of the stage. . . .

But after all, it was absurd. The event of the morning was the purest accident: something the like of which would never happen to me again. I would resume my path of tranquillity and write of the sober facts of existence as I saw them. No element of sensation should enter either into my life or my books.

Bah! The severed arm meant nothing, mattered nothing. The sheerest episode. Let me forget it.

And so, greatly comforted I sought the street.

2

As I passed the lodge of the concierge I quickened my pace. I did not want to see Cecile. More and more did I feel ashamed

of myself. If I spoke to her just then I would be cold and stiff. Later on, the feeling would evaporate. But I would never kiss her again, never.

From the corner of my eye I had a glimpse of her in the rear of the lodge. Cooking her supper, no doubt. Yet she must have been watching for me, for just as I reached the street I heard her open the door. No doubt, she was even then looking after me, hoping I would turn. But I was careful not to do that. I felt faintly resentful. She must not think that a solitary kiss gave her any claim on me. If she had anything particular to tell me she could say it later on.

Well, I too must think of supper; so I decided to go to a café, order a pot of tea and some bread and butter. Walking along the Boulevard Montparnasse I bought a copy of the *Intransigeant*. Ha! there it was in staring letters on the front page:

MAN CUT IN MORSELS

Eagerly I read:

"This morning a shocking discovery was made in the vicinity of the Markets. Two women returning from their work noticed on a heap of stones on the Quay de la Megisserie a large parcel. On investigation it proved to contain a human arm severed at the shoulder.

"The amputation had been done with what seemed to be surgical skill, and the limb was evidently that of an old man. The gruesome object was wrapped in black packing paper, but the string with which it had been fastened was missing. The ghastly relic was taken to the local Commissariat, where the two women, Marie Benoit and Louise Durand (photos inset) gave their testimony.

"*Later.* What looks to be another portion of the same body was found at about the same early hour in the basin of the Fontaine de Medicis by a lady American art student whose name has not been ascertained. She was on her way to paint in the garden when she noticed a dark object in the water. Drawing the attention of the sentry on guard, he succeeded in bringing it to the surface. What was the horror of the onlookers to find that the dripping parcel contained a human leg.

"Again, the amputation had been done cleanly and with

skill, and the limb appeared to be that of an old man. Awaiting further developments it was taken to the police headquarters in the Rue Soufflot.

"*Latest.* As we go to press a third discovery has been made. This time it was in the Parc du Monsouris, and the finder was a boy returning from school. (Marcel Gerard, photo inset.) His attention was attracted by a dark packet partially concealed by a clump of bushes. With some comrades he pulled it out and opened it. They were stricken with fear, however, when they discovered the arm of a man. In great excitement they informed the guardian of the Parc, who immediately communicated with the police.

"At the time of writing it seems that the three limbs belong to the same person, and that a ghastly and mysterious crime has been committed. Search for further remains is being busily pursued, and the affair is engrossing the attention of the most efficient chiefs of the Sûreté."

That was all. No mention of the part I had played. Well, I would say nothing. The whole business disgusted me. I felt that for a moment I had touched hands with the monstrous and the unclean.

Reflecting thus, I found myself in front of the Café de la Rotonde. Ordinarily I hated the place with its unique collection of human freaks; but at this hour it was not very full, so I decided to take supper there.

Installing myself at a small table I gazed at the pictures above the mirrors. Each seemed crazier than the other, and I could make little of them. Then from the latest extravagance of the latest school my eyes went to the habitués of the famous café.

Russian Jews, unsavoury and bulgy of brow; Yiddish youths, all hair and gleaming eye; men who dressed like women and women who dressed like men: a lean, hawk-faced individual with a dirty white turban, a negress with a turban of vivid green; a youth with a fluffy rim of chin whisker framing a moon face and with gold pendants in his ears; boys who held each other's hands and girls who kissed each other's lips; flaunting sex perversity and more than a hint of drug practice: a depraved, degenerate mob.

And though every language seemed to be spoken, Polish,

Yiddish, and Russian predominated. From every table rose a jabber of harsh tongues as short-haired women and long-haired men clamoured and gesticulated. . . . Flat-faced, dowdy Russian women; beaky Polish Jewesses with bad teeth; unshorn faces cast in every mould of ugliness; girls of the street passing amid the tables looking for friends; unwholesome American and English women, living the hectic life of this sham Bohemia.

As I ate I glanced at the second page of my paper, and in an obscure corner I saw a small paragraph that startled me:

> "The number of deaths from the new form of *grippe* shows an alarming tendency to increase. In spite of all the precautions of the authorities, yesterday's total reached the two hundred figure. However, an effort is being made to prevent it spreading further, and it is to be hoped that in a few weeks we will see the suppression of this strange new malady."

That was bad. What if it should turn out to be the Polish *grippe* after all! Some of these shock-headed Poles about me might even have brought it in. Evidently the authorities were keeping very quiet about it – only an occasional discreet paragraph like the one I had just read. Mustn't stampede the public. . . . Wonder how the mother of Cecile is getting on? Hope for the girl's sake no harm comes to her.

As I sipped my tea, I cast a somewhat envious eye on the next table where the waiter had set a steaming plate. On a mound of cabbage reposed a sturdy red sausage flanked by slices of ham. The combination seemed a comforting one, and almost wistfully I watched it. It was being disposed of by a frail youth, round whose neck the arms of a buxom damsel were lovingly entwined. Cabbage and caresses! What a perfect dream!

A young lady of fortune, after looking vainly for a vacant table, sat down beside me. I made way for her – too much way, perhaps. Though we sat very close, I did not even touch her. From the corner of my eye I could see under a *cloche* hat tags of sorrel curls and a violence of rouge. Her profile displeased me. Across the way I watched a slim youth, with rosily polished nails, calmly take out a mirror and proceed

to make up his face. Verily there were all sorts and conditions of vice in this the most cosmopolitan café in the world.

The girl next me seemed to be edging nearer. Or was it that she was merely making herself more comfortable? She ordered coffee, and took a cigarette from a handbag.

"A light, monsieur, if you please."

"Sorry. Don't smoke."

A hatchet-faced, mop-headed young man at the next table obliged, but did not improve the occasion. Evidently the girl in the *cloche* hat failed to make an appeal. As she sat there smoking, I wondered if I ought to say something. No doubt she considered me stupid. I must really try to overcome my timidity. How could I ever get a knowledge of human nature if I was afraid of it? There might be copy here for my novel. I was going to make an effort to be agreeable, when I remembered the state of my finances. Even an innocent acquaintance would cost me money. Too bad, how I was thwarted at every turn. If only the editor of *Tip-Top Tales* would send me a cheque for "Bad Breath"! In any case I still had a few hundred francs to grub along with.

The next moment I was glad I had not spoken to my neighbour; for who should I see entering the café but Miss Jessamy Byng. She looked out of place there, with her cheeks of weathered red, and her air of freshness and force. She was with two young men: one had a straw-coloured forked beard, the other those dark side-whiskers known as rabbit's feet. At that moment the next table became vacant and they took it.

As she sat between them I could hear them talking across her, in very high-pitched voices. The blond young man was saying to the *brun* young man:

"Dear chap! You're simply wonderful."

A pleased protest from the other: "No, my dear fellow, don't let us talk of my poor efforts when your own work is so marvellous."

A pudgy elderly man passing their table shook hands all round. He wore rakishly a little college hat, and his placid face, pouched under the eyes, was like that of a woman. He seemed to be of some importance, for they both looked after him with awe.

"Isn't he simply glorious!" said the blond young man.

"Absolutely splendid!" said the *brun* one.

Miss Byng was not paying much attention to them. She was sketching an American lady of about seventy, who had bobbed her grey hair and was smoking a cigarette. In all that hectic throng Jessamy seemed the one note of cool, clean sanity. I could not see her very well, on account of the girl with the ginger-bread curls; but I got an occasional glimpse of her profile, and noted her faint, amused smile. She had a huge portfolio of drawings, and I guessed she had come from one of the schools of the Rue de la Grand Chaumiere.

She had finished her sketch of the ancient lady from the Middle West, and was looking round for a fresh subject when she saw me. As she bowed and smiled, the two youths turned to regard me. They were, I thought, a little supercilious in their stare.

Soon the girl next me paid for her coffee and went away. Then I saw Miss Byng rise and squeeze past the blond youth. With that friendly smile she plumped down beside me.

"Hullo, Bill, for the love of goodness! Whoever expected to see you here. You know, I kept a place for you at the Cochon d'Or this evening."

"I'm mighty sorry. But – I've been busy."

"You take yourself too seriously, young man. You'll work all the better if you play a bit. Well, you're not like most of the gang here. Heaven knows when they work. I see the same faces every time I come. If the place didn't close from two in the morning till six they'd sleep here. They do nothing but talk, talk. And they dread fresh air and exercise as the devil dreads holy water. Want to see some of my sketches?"

She turned over the big loose leaves in the portfolio. The drawings were done in charcoal from the nude model, and there was a brutal strength about them that surprised me. I admired the sure sweep of line, the bold effects of shadow. I didn't know much about art, but her work greatly impressed me. I told her so.

"So glad you like them. I hope to do something worth while yet. I've been painting all day on the quays. I love to work in the open air. You must come up to my studio, and I'll show you some of my efforts."

"Who are your friends?" I asked.

"One's a poet, t'other's a playwright. At least they allege they are. The blond is known as Cultus Shote. He's the son of old man Shote, the millionaire pork-packer. By the way,

he was asking about you. 'Who's your stalwart friend?' says he. 'A Californian fiction writer,' says I. 'You seem to take quite an interest in him,' says he. 'He wants a little taking care of,' says I. 'And you're going to do it?' says he. 'If he wants me to,' says I. So he sniffs and shuts up. I'll introduce you if you like."

"Thanks. Another time."

"Righto! See you to-morrow at the hashery. Good night, Bill."

Shortly after, the three of them left. When they had gone I reflected, "So that's who the fellow is – Cultus Shote. He didn't recognise me. Ah! if he had——"

And thereby hangs a little story.

3

I went home thinking of various things, but chiefly of Jessamy Byng. What a jolly good comrade she would make! And I was more than a little lonely.

It was after ten when I reached the house. All was gloom in the lodge of the concierge. I was hurrying past when I heard a voice:

"Please, monsieur, here's a letter for you."

It was Cecile. She must have been sitting in the dark. She was very pale, but her eyes were red. As I took the letter my heart sank.

"When did it come?"

"By the five o'clock delivery. I ran after you when you went out, but you were too quick for me."

"Thanks. It doesn't matter."

But I was thinking that it *did* matter. It was a bit of a facer. My short story, "Bad Breath," had been returned. For a moment I felt daunted. My voice was almost mechanical as I asked:

"What's the good news of your mother?"

"None, I fear. She's very bad."

"Oh, nonsense. You mustn't look on the black side. What do you know?"

"I went to the hospital this afternoon, but I wasn't allowed to see her. I gave a nurse five francs, but she could tell me nothing. Oh, I'm afraid, afraid."

She spoke in a low tone, looking such a forlorn little soul I wanted to take her in my arms and comfort her. But that would not do. I only said awkwardly:

"Come, Cecile, you must try to be brave. I'm sure to-morrow you'll have better news."

Suddenly she began to cry. I pushed her gently into the lodge.

"There, now, don't worry. It'll be all right. You're unstrung. Go to bed and get a good rest. To-morrow you'll see how different everything is. Go – that's a good little girl. And remember, if you want me, I'm always your friend."

CHAPTER IV

THE TRIBULATIONS OF AN AMATEUR AUTHOR

1

THE day had been too packed with exciting stuff to make sleep easy. More had happened in twenty-four hours than usually did in as many months. The severed arm, the kissing of Cecile, the meeting with Jessamy Byng, the rejection of my manuscripts – a little more like the last would take the starch out of me.

Finally, however, I dozed off, and when I awoke it was after eight. A radiant day. The studio seemed to ring with sunshine like a bell. Springing up, I opened my window and made my morning salutation to Paris. Not a cloud on the sky, not a shadow on the city. How could one harbour bodeful thoughts in the presence of such serenity?

As I dressed I felt invincibly gay. Indeed, who could be sad on such a morning? What if I were nearing the end of my funds? What if my stories were being returned? What if a conspiracy of circumstances prevented me from working? It was all right. In the end I would triumph.

So light-heartedly I was descending the stairs, when I thought of Cecile and her trouble. I looked into the lodge, but all was dark. I was rather glad she wasn't there. I wanted to enjoy my happiness of heart awhile, even if it had no solid foundation. And after all, is not most happiness based on illusion?

As I reached the street a voice hailed me. It was the caretaker of the next house, a ruddy-faced man who in his working hours was a policeman.

"Pardon, monsieur, but that good woman, your concierge, is she any better?"

"I hope so. I'm waiting to hear the latest news. I think her daughter must have gone to the hospital this morning."

"Ah, monsieur, I wouldn't hope too much. It's terrible,

this new form of *grippe*. It takes one to-day, and to-morrow one is finished. If it were not that my duty keeps me in Paris I would get away quickly. Believe me, it's far worse than they tell us. Being behind the scenes I hear more than most people, and – well, I am not reassured."

"You mustn't be an alarmist," I said. "No doubt they will get it under control."

"We must hope for the best. And that old professor who is your neighbour – I have not seen him taking the air on his balcony for three days. He has not got it, I suppose?"

"You know as much about him as I do. Although we are neighbours we are the most absolute strangers."

"Ah, yes, it's often like that. Well, he went out three nights ago. . . . We haven't seen him come back, my wife and I. And she doesn't miss much."

"After all, why should it interest us?"

"Not at all, monsieur, except that I'm in the police, and everyone interests me. Besides, he belongs to a race I haven't much use for. One who has gone through the war doesn't forget in a hurry."

He spat disgustedly, and with a brief good day retired to his domicile.

2

As it was now nearly ten o'clock, I decided to walk about till midday and then to lunch at the Cochon d'Or. On the quays I bought a copy of the *Matin*. There on the first page was the heading I expected: "The Man Cut in Morsels."

There were sensational developments, it appeared. The trunk had been found. Indeed, in the paper was a photograph of the ghastly thing with the bowels protruding. It had been wrapped in the same kind of paper, but this time it had been deposited in a refuse-box in the neighbourhood of the Bastille. Some scavengers, on their early rounds, had discovered it.

As far as any clue to the mystery was concerned, the police were profoundly reticent. All the merchants who dealt in that kind of window-cord were being questioned. Also the vendors of that sort of packing-paper. A vigorous search was being carried on for the parts of the body that remained to complete it, and inquiries as to missing old men were being made

in every quarter. Startling new developments were momentarily expected.

This much I read with a growing sense of uneasiness. Perhaps I should tell the police what I knew. But after all, how could I help them? There was only the yellow cat-hair on the cord I had thoughtlessly pocketed. Well, I would wait a little longer before I did anything.

I was early to arrive at the Cochon d'Or, got the same table as before, and tilted the opposite chair to reserve it. I deferred giving my order, keeping my eyes fixed on the door. She was very late. At one o'clock I gave up all hope of her, and ordered my own lunch, but my disappointment made it seem tasteless. Perhaps she'd gone to lunch with someone else – maybe with the bearded youth. I had bought a little bunch of violets and laid them on her plate. Now I furtively removed them, conscious of the amused look of the waiter. I would give them to Cecile. No, I would put them in water in the studio and look at them wistfully.

3

But, after all, the violets never reached the studio; for about half-past two, as I crossed the Pont des Arts, I saw her on the middle of the bridge making a pastel of the Isle St. Louis. For a moment I watched her deft fingers twinkling over the box of broken colours. As I laid my violets on the corner of her easel she seemed to come to herself with a start.

"Oh, it's you, Bill. How nice of you. Aren't they lovely!"

Impulsively she kissed them, as over their delicate bloom she looked at me with sparkling eyes.

"Aren't you the wonderful worker," I said awkwardly.

"Yes, aren't I. Look at that. I only began it this morning."

"Corking! I wish I knew more about art. You might teach me."

"If you teach me about literature."

"I'm only a learner myself."

"Well, you'll tell me about your work."

(A sympathetic comrade with whom I could share my thoughts. I felt a glow.)

"My work's not very successful," I said, thinking of "Bad Breath."

"Success will come. One must stick to the job and keep believing in one's self."

(More glow. She would encourage and stimulate me.)

"I waited for you at lunch to-day."

"Did you? I'm sorry. I got so wrapped up in my work I forgot lunch. I haven't eaten since breakfast, really."

"You poor thing. Stop now and we'll go and dig up some grub."

"No. I want to keep on while the light's good. You might run and get me a cookie."

It was delightful to be treated so unceremoniously, and speedily I returned with a bag of pastry.

"Oh, you shouldn't have got so much. But now you mention it, I *am* hungry. Won't you help me?"

Together we ate the cakes. When we had finished she took up her chalks again. I was ashamed to stand idling while she was working, so I said:

"I must cut back to my Corona. I only hope I'll get half as good a result as you've done. See you to-morrow for lunch, I suppose?"

"I'll be there. I won't lose myself again. . . . And now, 'J. B.,' to work, to work !"

4

"To work, to work," was also the refrain of "H. Q." as he gained his neglected studio. He had a sense of inspiration. True, he had a momentary douche, as, peering through the glass door of his concierge's lodge, he saw no one. Cecile had not returned. However, his vague depression quickly vanished.

His Corona reminded him of a mill. Blank sheets went into it and came out – literature of a sort. But alas! for two days now the mill had ground nothing. As he looked at it thoughtfully, his eyes went to his rejected manuscripts. He had not the heart to send them out again. Would he like to lend them to Jessamy Byng? No, he wouldn't. Would he like to read to her from his novel *Garbage*? Be hanged if he would. He stared at it distastefully. In any case, if he was going to make his living as an author he couldn't afford to work at novels. He must rope in the ready cheque.

Yet alas! again the afternoon passed and the sheet in my typewriter remained blank.

5

About five I gave up in despair and sought the Luxembourg. Seated on a bench, I read the evening paper. The affair of the "Man Cut in Morsels" was prominent. The second leg, it appeared, had been discovered. It was found in the Champ de Mars, at the base of the Eiffel Tower, by a legless peddler of picture post-cards.

Now every part of the body had been found, except the most important, the head. Until that turned up there would be little chance of identifying the victim. The police were redoubling their efforts, and any hour might reveal the solution of this tenebrous affair. The inquiries among the thousand and one merchants who dealt in cord and packing paper had been fruitless. Various sales were reported, but in no case could the shopkeeper give a clear description of his customer.

On the other hand, the anatomical examination by the Doctor of the Sûreté had revealed nothing new. The dismembering had been done with skill, and the body was undoubtedly that of an old man. There was no wound on the trunk of any kind, and no mark that might lead to identification. The spectromicroscopical examination by the head of the specialist department was equally unrewarded. There was no indication, either on the body or on its various wrappings, to give the police a clue. For the moment they were baffled.

One feature of the case, however, was the number of letters they received regarding missing relatives. Dozens of those came in by every mail. Hotel-keepers reported the sudden disappearance of clients – usually with unpaid bills. Or it might be a young American with a bunch of money and an ambition to make things sparkle. Every one of these cases had to be investigated, even though the age of the missing individual failed to correspond with the supposed age of the victim. Still, there were enough old men unaccounted for to send the police off on many a fruitless trail.

Another feature was the number of unknown correspondents who wrote in a spirit of ribaldry. There were illusions to

it in the witty weeklies, and gags about it in the revues. It was becoming the butt of burlesque. The Parisian public that mocks at everything was beginning to treat the affair as a matter of mirth. All this was very annoying to the police. The paragraphers of the daily press lost no opportunity to jeer at them, and long articles on the undiscovered crimes of the past began to appear.

As I read eagerly I had that same feeling of uneasiness. But, after all, what had I to do with it? How could I help the police? No, I would keep out of that business.

Half unconsciously I found myself taking the road to the Rotonde. Though I bluffed myself to the contrary, in my heart I knew it was in the hope of encountering Miss Byng. After wandering vainly through the establishment, I crossed over to that rival café, the Dôme. She was not on the terrace, but when I peered through the window that gives on the Rue Delambre I saw her. As I expected, she was with the blond youth, lighting a cigarette at his. They seemed to be very friendly. I felt annoyed, yet was obliged to admit I had no right to be. Well, I would think no more about her for the present.

6

I decided to leave this Bohemia of the artists and go to that other Bohemia of the students. In the Café d'Harcourt I found a quiet corner, and ordered a bowl of *soup au gratin*. This, with some bread and coffee, made my supper. I ate slowly, listening to the music, and later on ordered another cup of coffee. Indeed it was towards midnight when I left for home. Cecile would have returned, as after ten o'clock the front door was closed and she was obliged to open it to all comers.

Immediately in answer to my ring the latch clicked. I entered quietly and called my name at the lodge of the concierge, halting a moment as I gazed at its gloomy interior. Then I heard a sound that made my heart sink – a succession of deep sobs at short intervals, as of one too exhausted to cry continuously.

"Poor *gosse*!" I muttered. "She must have heard the worst."

A desire to comfort her came over me, and gently I knocked at the door. Because there was no reply, I opened it and

entered. The place was almost in darkness. A screen enclosed the bed, and it was from behind this I heard those choking sobs. After a moment of hesitation I peered round it.

She was lying on the bed, face down. Only very vaguely could I see her slight form, shaken from time to time by grief. Bending over her pityingly, I longed to take her in my arms as I would a child. For a little I paused thus, then I said:

"It's I, your friend. What's the matter, little girl?"

No reply. I bent lower, laying a hand on her thin shoulder.

"Have you had bad news? How is your mother?"

Her answer came in a great sob: "*Elle est morte.*"

Dead! I felt a little choke in my throat, a moment of shock. Yet it was what I had been fearing. Ah! this ghastly new malady. . . .

"I'm so sorry, my poor girl. If there's anything I can do for you I'll do it."

As she did not respond, I knelt down beside the bed and reached one arm over her. My face was then quite close to her head, and I whispered in her ear:

"Courage! It will all come right."

I could not see her face, but I knew she had turned it towards me. I could hear her sobs on her quivering lips. Suddenly she had both her arms round my neck and her cheek was pressed to mine. After all, what could I do but let her remain like that? Besides, was I not sorry for her?

"Hush!" I went on caressingly. "Don't cry so, little one. I know how bad you feel, but crying only hurts yourself."

Her answer was a fresh burst of sobbing. It was terribly quiet, her sobbing, more like a gasping for breath. I felt I could really do nothing but let her exhaust herself. Almost instinctively, as I continued to hold her, I pressed her gently to me from time to time. Then, as her arms tightened round my neck, I realised that her grief had taken on a hysterical quality.

"Good God! I mustn't get too sympathetic," I thought.

But it would have been brutal to break away at that moment. A groan escaped me.

"You'll help me, won't you?" she was whispering in my ear.

"Yes, yes."

"I'm all alone now. No one to go to. I'll be turned out of here in a day or two. What will become of me?"

I was feeling most uncomfortable. Too well I knew what would happen to a poor and friendless girl alone in Paris. She must be saved from that.

"Don't be afraid," I told her. "I'm your friend, am I not?"

Tighter I felt her cling, drawing desperately close to me. As she raised herself, both my arms went round her supportingly. I could feel her flat bosom against me, shaken with sobs. Now she was kissing me, passionately, hysterically. I was aware of tears running down her cheeks. I kissed them away, tasting them salt on my lips. After all, what less could I have done?

No doubt I was soothing her. Her sobs had almost ceased. Only at longer intervals did a deep-drawn one come from her, but it sounded more like a sigh. As she raised herself in my arms I was obliged to rise also, so that I was now sitting on the bed beside her. Her arms were round my neck and her lips were pressed tightly to mine. . . .

Perhaps it was the persistent pressure of those lips that roused me, so that from sympathy I passed to passion. Perhaps the reaction from great grief is sensuality, and it operated in the case of this girl. She had drawn so close to me that I could feel the trembling of her whole body. And indeed it seemed as if she clung to me with her whole body, and I could never release myself.

Then there was the darkness. The darkness seemed to bind us, blotting out our personalities, making us just two human beings, for the moment obsessed by sex emotion. Nervously she was holding my head between her hands. From her feverish lips pressed to mine came wild words. I wanted to break away – oh, how I wanted! But it was doubly hard now. Suddenly I realised that when I spoke of being her friend the word had not the same meaning to her as it had to me. To her "friend" meant "lover." I tried to release myself, but her arms clung desperately. Her voice was frightened.

"You'll not leave me," she gasped. "You couldn't be so cruel. You're all I've got. When they turn me out into the streets, what will become of me if I haven't got you? Oh, promise me you won't leave me in my moment of despair."

"No, no. But – we'll arrange all that."

"Yes, yes. I'll come to you. I'll not be in the way. I'll help you, look after you so devotedly. I'll be your slave, your everything. Please let me stay with you."

She sensed resistance in me. She was fighting for her life. She must make sure of me now. I felt this in all her desperate clinging, in the distraction of her words.

"You will, won't you? I'll cost so little, and I can work, too. I'll never be a bother to you, and if you want me to go away, I'll go and never give you a word of blame. Take me, take me."

CHAPTER V

THE TRAIL OF THE YELLOW CAT

1

FACING the statue of Henri Quatre on the Pont Neuf is a small street that, like the neck of a funnel, opens on the Place Dauphine. The Place is flanked by grey, historic houses, and backed by the august Palace of Justice. It is filled with foliage, while under friendly trees are inviting benches. Truly a pleasant spot in the heart of the city, where, in the shadow of a vanished day, one may dally and dream.

But in the misty chill of the dawn it is not so inviting, and here on a damp bench while day was breaking I huddled in hopeless misery. Something had happened that had altered my whole life. Something I had done in a moment of madness that was irrevocable. And now, like a man stunned by sudden misfortune, I had come here to think it out.

I had left Cecile to the mercy of sleep, promising to see her in the morning. But I had not mounted to the studio. Only the night air, I felt, could cool the fever in my veins. I must try to grasp the situation, readjust myself to it. Instinctively I sought this little triangle of verdure where I had spent so many tranquil hours.

I regarded the thing according to my lights. To another it might have been merely a banal adventure; to me it was a catastrophe. Ah, what folly! To pledge the future for a passing pleasure. For I did not for a moment shirk the consequences. I had done wrong and I would pay the price.

And if I seem to exaggerate what had happened, be it remembered that I had been brought up in a high, austere land, where the air is pure and the setting noble. There is really something in that. Besides, on my mother's side I was of a family of Puritans who walked with backbone stiff and head high. I had been trained in that school, and had failed to outgrow it. Despite my professed tolerance, I fear I still had the narrow ideals of my ancestors.

Now I *was* in a mess. There was, according to my mind, but

one way out – to marry Cecile. I would, too. That very day I would see about it. It was a bitter pity, but I must make the best of it. It occurred to me that Cecile would be content with an irregular union, but that idea I rejected as furtive and unclean. For me there was only one solution, marriage. It might be disastrous, but it was playing the game.

So sitting alone in the shadow of these sad old houses, and faced with the emblematic façade of the Palace of Justice, I grappled with my problem. Silver mists were rising from the Seine as I took the quay that skirts the Conciergerie. I thought of the daily procession of girls that tramped this same sidewalk to enter that tenebrous building. And because of me Cecile might, one day, form one of that pitiable procession. Never! I could at least save her from that.

After all, why shouldn't I make her happy? We could get along awfully well together, and she would make a good little wife. But I didn't want to marry. Once in my life I had wanted to; and at the thought of Rosemary I stood frowning gloomily at the olive-green Seine. . . . But that was all over now. I must find some work that would support Cecile. This Paris would become a grim battleground. A man must play the game.

I could not go back to my room just yet. I could not face Cecile. I took some coffee in a bar, where I had a wash at the same time. Then I decided to walk somewhere, walk till I was tired out. I wanted the country, green fields, and willows that waded in rippling water. There, with nothing to distract me, I would get a more cheerful angle on the situation.

Following the car line in the direction of Charenton, I found myself about midday on the bank of the Marne. Lying there, I gazed moodily at the smooth-flowing stream. With bitter insistence the thought came to me that just about this time Jessamy Byng was sitting down to lunch at the Cochon d'Or, and keeping a place for me. Perhaps her eyes were going to the door just as mine had done. That was yesterday, but, oh, how far away it seemed! Well, I would never see *her* again.

I brooded there till late in the afternoon, then in a café I had some soup and bread. I could eat little, but drank a half-bottle of white wine, and was surprised to find out how much more cheerful I was. Indeed, I began to review the situation with a certain philosophy. Cecile took on a wistful

charm. After all, it might work out all right. Poor kid! I must get back to her, though.

I had walked farther than I thought, for when I re-entered Paris the lights of evening were beginning to shine. I was tired, too; so tired that I dragged one leg after the other. Dusty and footsore, I entered a *bistro* that gave on the fortifications and had some coffee with a thimble of brandy in it. This seemed to do me so much good that I ordered a second one. As I sipped it I glanced at the evening paper. The first thing I saw was a note of alarm sounded over the spread of that new form of *grippe*. "Pneumonic *grippe*" they called it now, and hinted that it might be of the same deadly type as that which had devastated Poland. Readers were advised to take certain precautions, especially as to drinking water, and to avoid contact with all who showed any sign of the malady. There was no indication given of the daily death roll, but a suggestion that it was formidable.

The affair of the "Man Cut in Morsels" was now relegated to an inside page. One item, however, startled me. It ran:

> "It is reported that on the morning of the discovery of the first portion of the body a young man was seen loitering in the vicinity. He disappeared shortly after, and so far the police have been unable to trace him. No very definite accounts of him have come to hand; but it is reported that he had the air of a foreigner, probably of an American. He is said to be of unusual height, and of athletic build. There is no tendency, so far, to think that this individual is in any way connected with the crime; but for various reasons the police would be glad to hear from him."

There! It seemed as if I never could clear myself of this sinister business. I had the feeling of a net inexorably drawing about me. Then I laughed harshly. I appeared to be in trouble all round. But how trivial this was, compared with that other! I mocked at it. Let the police find their mysterious American. I would do nothing to help them.

Feeling bucked up by the brandy, I walked on in the growing darkness. I had no idea where I was going, but that did not bother me. To tell the truth, I was trying to defer the moment when I must return home. It was a clear night with

a freshness in the air, and at their doors the concierges of the tall, gaunt buildings sat on chairs and gossiped. I guessed I must be in the north of the city – Menilmontant, maybe. What an unsavoury neighbourhood! There were long stretches of deserted boulevard where the road lay between the fortifications and the blank walls of big workshops. Slim youths in black passed me, with caps drawn down over sallow, vicious faces. Several times was I accosted by bobbed-haired girls with brilliant blouses and ravaged lips. I was now in Belleville, most sinister of districts and the home of the true apache. But a man in dire trouble mocks at such danger. In my reckless mood I would have entered a tiger-haunted jungle without a qualm.

Soon I reached the Belleville gate. In front was a triangular space into which converged several streets that sloped slummily to the city. It was very quiet and deserted here, and the lighting, which was rather uncertain, gave to the open space a theatrical effect. I sat on a bench that skirted the fortifications, with at my back all the vague darkness of that sinister no-man's land where human beasts prowl. Before me I could see the gaunt corners of some grey houses like a Meryon etching, and a low café of the picturesquely squalid type. Above it in the weird light I could read its sign:

AU LAPIN VENGEUR

The name intrigued me, and the place certainly had character. It was a *bal musette*, too. A painted canvas announced that the renowned orchestra, consisting of Gomez with his guitar, and Casque d'Or with her accordion, played every evening. As I stared at the sign, for a moment I forgot my troubles, then, feeling something touch my leg, I started.

I looked down to behold a large, yellow cat.

2

I stroked the cat gently. With back curved it was rubbing against me. It looked up at me with eyes like sapphire flame. I caressed the upturned head so that it purred with rapture, and presently leaped on the bench beside me. A yellow cat!

That carried my mind back to the crime of the severed arm, and I continued to stroke it thoughtfully. I was aroused from my reverie by a woman.

She seemed to come from nowhere in particular, and, with a quick glance, was going to pass me. Suddenly she changed her mind and sat down on the other end of the bench.

"One of the Zone prostitutes," I thought, and waited with resignation for the invariable greeting. But it did not come. It was the cat that had halted her. It deserted me and went to this woman as if it already knew her. She took it on her lap, caressing it familiarly. I could see its yellow fur in her arms, its whiskers brushing her cheek. She was scratching it under the chin, calling it by name.

"Is it yours?" I asked.

She turned, staring at me with great frankness. "Mine! no. It belongs to the *patron* of the Lapin Vengeur."

Her voice was deep, with a husky quality and a drooping intonation. It was coarse, yet curiously attractive. She was looking at me without any particular interest, almost insolently. This rather nettled me.

"But it seems a friend of yours," I went on.

"Oh, I know it well. I work over there."

She was rather a tall girl, and sat very straight. Her silhouette was decisive and suggested strength. She wore no hat, but her hair, that seemed very thick, was coiled in tight braids around her head. It was a pale, bright gold, and glistened in the gaslight. A thought struck me.

"You're not Casque d'Or, are you?"

She turned her full face to me. She was of the *gavroche* type. Every feature was wrong, yet the ensemble was disturbingly likeable – more so than mere prettiness.

"That's what they call me," she said rather contemptuously.

"And you are a professional musician?"

"I play the accordion in that *bouge* over there, if that's what you mean. What did you think I was?"

"I didn't think."

"You lie. You thought I was a *grue*."

"I did – at first."

"I'm glad you tell the truth. What are you doing here?"

She was looking at me keenly, appraising me from head to foot.

"I'm – resting. I've walked till my feet ache. I'm tired."

"Have you any money?"

Plunging my hand into my pocket, I drew out a five-franc bill and some silver.

"That's all. Want it?"

"Keep your money, you poor devil! I only asked you because you'd be a fool to come round here with money. There are too many who would put you to sleep if they thought you had anything worth while taking. You're not French?"

"No, American."

"Ah! I knew some Americans during the war. They were kind to me when I was in trouble. I am of the North. You can tell that by my yellow hair. I liked those American men. They were tall and strong – like you."

"I was only a small boy during the war. I'm mighty sorry I was too young to be one of your Americans."

"And I was only a little girl. I'm nearly twenty-three now."

"I'll be twenty-four next month."

There was a bit of a silence, in which she seemed thoughtful, and I could hear the purring of the yellow cat. In the greenish lamplight in front of the Lapin Vengeur shadows met on the patch of pavement, clustered for a moment, then entered. Again the effect struck me as being strangely stage-like.

"Why have you chosen this place to rest?" she asked.

"It seemed quiet, and – I didn't care."

"It's too quiet. It's the most dangerous place in Paris. If you stay here there's a strong chance of your resting for good."

Across the way I saw three black figures with faces turned towards us, and I guessed what she meant.

"Why should they bother me? I've got nothing to take."

"They don't know that. They would think it worth while to make sure you had nothing to take. A tap on the *boule* with a bit of rubber tubing would be enough. You're asking for it! Listen! I know some American. *Goddam! Sonofabitch!* That's American, isn't it?"

"I seem to have heard it before. But I don't think we have the entire copyright. Where did you hear that?"

"American major. Major Jones. You know him?"

"No. Where does he live."

"In America."

"That's a big place. And I imagine there's more than one Jones."

"What's your name?"

"Harley Quin."

"Harlequin! What a droll name! You're in trouble?"

"How do you know that?"

"I feel it. Is it a woman?"

For some reason I answered, "No. What makes you think that?"

"You look like the sort who get into trouble with women. Or get women into trouble. Well, what is it?"

I hesitated. Then I had a thought. "The police are searching for me."

"Ah! that's why you come here. We don't like the police. Still, there's plenty would betray you, even among us."

"What do you mean by 'us'?"

She was silent. Again the yellow cat came to me and I caressed it.

"Don't be afraid," she said. "I wouldn't betray you. You notice I don't even ask you what the police want you for."

"I wouldn't tell you. See! There are some of your men friends waving to you to join them."

I could see their faces, a white blur, and hear the *Hist!* of their call.

"Yes, I'm going. But – I wouldn't stay here if I were you."

"I'm not going to. I'm coming with you."

She made a gesture of protest. "Don't! These men are dangerous."

"I'm not afraid. Besides, am I not one of you?"

She shrugged. "Come, then."

As she rose I thought that physically she was a fine girl. She was tall and straight, but she had a slouching walk, her hands in the pockets of a striped sweater. I felt a curious sense of having known her for a long time. She seemed to appeal to something savage in me. If these men tried any tricks – by God! I could hold my own.

As I crossed the street I felt their scrutinising stare. Hostile it was, and silent. With grim faces and cold, sneering eyes they peered at me from under the brims of their caps.

As the light of the café shone directly on them I was able to get a vivid impression.

The first was short and burly, with a rich, brick-red complexion. He had a small moustache, so blond that against the beef-like hue of his face it looked a canary colour. His eyebrows, too, were blond, and his eyelashes were like pig's bristles.

The second was of medium height. He had a moon-white face and dark hair. His sloe-black eyes had a twinkle of amused malice. There was a watchful calm in his manner, and the hands with which he was rolling a cigarette were white and fine. He looked like a man of the South, with ironical lips to match his malicious eyes. He had something of the air of an actor.

The third man was sheer brute, but brute with brains. He was over six feet in height, and built with uncommon power. What was striking about his face was that it was so horribly pock-marked. Even his beak of a nose was pitted. Over a savagely jutting jaw sprouted a moustache of the walrus type, so strong that the hairs were like wire. Under bristly brows his eyes were pale and cruel.

All three, I noted, were lean at the stomach line, and seemed hard and fit.

It was the last man, however, who showed any truculence. Over the edge of the cigarette-paper he was licking he looked at the girl.

"Who's the *type*?" he growled, in the guttural accents of the underworld.

She shrugged those fine shoulders. "I know nothing. He says the police want him. An American."

"An American! *Hein?* What's he done?"

"Said you'd knifed a man, didn't you?"

I nodded. It seemed safer.

"Humph! Well, it's none of our affair. Come on Casque d'Or."

Without a further look at me, she followed them into the Lapin Vengeur. After waiting a little I went on my way. I must make up my mind to return home. Cecile would be waiting for me. It was cruel of me to leave her so long. As I turned my face in the direction of the Pantheon I had a very appealing vision of her, and I determined to make up for my neglect.

"I'm going to be good to her," I said. "So help me God! It'll work out all right. To-morrow I'll see about getting married and we'll make the best of things."

3

When I reached the Pantheon it was eleven o'clock, and I was surprised to see a light in the lodge. My surprise became dismay when I found that a strange woman occupied it.

"Where's Mademoiselle Cecile?" I faltered.

"Ah, monsieur – the poor girl! They took her away to the hospital not half an hour ago."

"What – what was the matter?"

"One supposes the same as her mother – the new malady. At about seven this evening she had a violent vomiting, and they sent for the doctor, who at once telephoned to the city authorities. They don't lose any time now. They've run up a temporary wooden hospital at Montrouge, and though they're building on to it as fast as they can, they cannot keep up with the fresh cases. Isn't it terrible!"

"Have they taken her there?"

"Yes. Ah, monsieur, I don't know what is going to become of us all. The proprietor told me to take the place of the concierge here, and I'm glad of it; but I hadn't had time to get it disinfected. Heaven knows, the air must be full of microbes. And they say it's so infectious. And what a terrible end. They say one turns purple, can't breathe. One dies in atrocious suffering. I've half a mind to throw up this place and go off to the country. Well, we're all in God's hands."

I left her hurriedly, my mind bewildered by emotion. Arrived in the studio, I threw myself on my bed and stared haggardly up at the stars. I could not grasp it. Now that Cecile was in danger, something that could pass for love came to me – pity, tenderness. The thought of her suffering was pain. At last the nervous strain of the past twenty-four hours proved too much for me, and turning my face to the pillow I cried:

"My poor child! Come back to me. I'll make you happy always."

I saw her again, with her pale, wistful face and her large, grey eyes, her dark hair, cut Jeanne-d'Arc fashion, her

delicate hands. She was a frail blossom of the city, but I would have cherished her.

"Cecile!" I cried again. "Come back, come back."

Then, all exhausted, I fell asleep.

4

Next morning I walked out to the hospital. It was a low, flimsy erection, just beyond the city. A high boarding had been put round it, and a sentry with fixed bayonet barred my entrance.

"No admittance except by doctor's order."

"But I want to get news of a patient. What must I do?"

"I don't know. My orders are to admit no one without an order."

"Then a parent may not even see his child?"

"Nor a man his wife, monsieur."

I went heavily away. Every moment I saw arriving ambulances with fresh patients, and on adjoining ground a regiment of carpenters were feverishly running up new buildings. Evidently things were getting very serious.

Early in the morning I received a note which had been delivered by hand. It was written in pencil on the flimsiest of paper.

"Dear Friend, – I fear I am going to die, and perhaps it is for the best. This bad malady has caught me. I only hope you may escape it. If I should die my last thoughts will be of you. I love you, and because I love you I am very happy, even though I am so ill. I bless you for this happiness that has come to me, and if I should never see you again I want you to be as happy as I am. You must forget me and do not grieve for me, for I do not want you to be sad.

"Good-bye, good-bye, and believe in my eternal love.

"Cecile."

Full of remorse I sat down and composed a long letter to her. I tried to cheer her up with the belief that she would recover. I painted a fancy picture of how happy we would be together. I also told her I was arranging for our marriage. As I wrote I felt the insincerity of much that I said, but

she should never know it. My letter, I thought, would brighten her last moments if her illness proved fatal; if it did not, I would come through with the goods. I felt happier after I had posted it.

As I was writing, I happened to glance down. Something adhering to my trousers attracted me. It was half a dozen hairs where the yellow cat had rubbed against me. I laid them alongside that I had found on the window-cord. Examined through the magnifying glass, they seemed identical. The fact started me off on a strange train of thought, from which only the importance of my letter recalled me.

I went to bed early and had a night haunted by hideous dreams. There was Casque d'Or and the old professor looking from the balcony. The three apaches had somehow captured Jessamy Byng. Cecile was in the clutches of a colossal yellow cat. Every time I slept I had a fresh nightmare more terrible than the one before; so that at last I rose, vowing I would sleep no more.

Opening my window, I breathed the cold, pure air of the early morning. A rosy mist was in the east, promising a day of heat. It would be good to get away from the streets into the cool of the country, into some forest of green glades and purple crepuscule. The longing came to me suddenly.

What of the old professor? One did not see him any more. Had he gone away? Then the whimsical idea came into my head that *he* might be the man who had been cut in morsels. Up to this moment I had not thought of it. Why not? But it was an absurd notion. Yet it was curious how it persisted.

5

After breakfast in a little café round the corner, I determined to pursue the matter a little further. I found the ruddy concierge of the next building just returned from duty and taking off his uniform.

"No, monsieur," said he, "so far as I know the old man has not come back."

"What of those amputated remains they found? The old man is missing seemingly, and the portions of the body are those of a person of about the same age."

"*Tiens!* monsieur. That's an idea."

He thought for a moment, then continued: "But we are only assuming that the *vieux* is missing. Perhaps he has gone off somewhere – a trip to his own country. He would indeed be wise to get away from Paris at this time. Is there no one in his apartment?"

"His secretary, I suppose."

"Well, if his secretary expected him to return before now, and he didn't, he would report his absence to the police, wouldn't he? But there has been nothing of the kind. *Causons du diable!* Here comes the secretary."

A long strip of a man was approaching. His shoulders were rounded and he walked with a shambling gait, pushing forward a scraggy neck. His head was very small, with yellow, screwed-up features. Over his arm he had a net bag full of provisions.

"*Bon jour*, monsieur," said the concierge, hailing him. The man paused with a marked unwillingness.

"It is a fine morning, monsieur. You are making your marketing, it seems," went on the concierge genially.

"That is evident," said the other, and made to pass him. But the concierge was not to be so easily rebuffed.

"And monsieur your *patron*? Is he well on these sad days?"

"Monsieur the professor is in excellent health," stated the secretary.

"Ah! he is no doubt on a visit. Will he be back soon?"

"Monsieur the professor has gone away. He will be back in a few days. He is very well, and I thank you for your solicitude on his behalf."

As he moved on there was more than a hint of irony in the man's tone. When he had gone, the concierge shrugged his fat shoulders.

"There! You see, monsieur, there is no reason to confuse your neighbour with the man cut in morsels. I am rather sorry though. What a triumph it would have been for me. And I would not have grieved for that old animal a sou's worth."

Thoughtfully I returned to my room. I was not so convinced. The idea, once implanted, was not to be easily rooted out. My confused memories of that time when I had drunkenly blundered into their apartment came back to me. That experience was vaguer now than ever. Indeed I had almost forgotten it in the stress of recent events. I tried to recall it, yet

failed to get a sense of its reality. I did not like the secretary, however. There was something evasive in his manner and he did not relish being questioned.

Later I scanned the morning paper for something fresh about the affair. Beyond the fact that they were still looking for the head, there was nothing new. Yet stay. . . . There were a few lines about the young man who had been seen loitering on the quay just before the discovery. One of the market-women had given a description of me sufficiently accurate to be disquieting. The theory was now advanced that it was this strange young man who had *deposited* the parcel. I groaned as I read this. I was beginning to fear that when I went out I might be recognised as the mysterious American. It would be awkward at this stage of the game. Seemed as if I was getting myself into a rotten mess. More and more I felt inclined to get out of the way for a time.

But if there was little about the "man cut in morsels," there was enough about the new epidemic. Small doubt remained that it was a form of the Polish *grippe*. It was true that it had swept Poland, claiming its victims by the hundred thousand, but in France, with all the most modern resources of preventive medicine, it would be different. Now that the identity of the malady was admitted, the authorities were thoroughly alive to the danger. The public could be assured that every effort would be taken to isolate the afflicted.

Though the tone of the article was one of cheer, there was no mistaking its undertone of alarm. Not since the days of the Great War had such a note of gravity been sounded.

My own gravity was profound after reading it. As I descended the stairs again I looked into the lodge where the new concierge was cooking her lunch.

"I'm going out to the hospital," I said, "to see if there's any fresh news of Mademoiselle Cecile."

She scarcely paused in her *cuisine*. "It isn't worth while, monsieur. She died early this morning."

CHAPTER VI

JESSAMY JUMPS THE TRACES

After the death of Cecile I had but one thought – to get away.

I wanted wide horizons, to march and march till the sickness was driven from my soul. Instinctively I turned my face to Fontainebleau. Its green tranquillity would comfort me; each of its myriad leaves would flutter a separate welcome; brave dawns would greet me and rich sunsets glow. I would take the path that pleased me most, in love with life again. Yes, the forest would heal my hurt.

When, twelve days later, I returned to Paris, I felt like a new man. Sweet airs and the gentleness of trees had made me sound again. With distaste I trod the dusty pavement after carpets of pine cones. With disgust I walked along the stuffy streets. "I don't believe I can stick it long," I thought.

The studio was stifling, and when I closed my door it was like imprisonment. My papers lay as I had left them, my neglected novel reproaching me, my typewriter dimmed with dust. There was a sadness about it all that aroused poignant regrets. Yet the memory of Cecile was fading fast – and perhaps that was the saddest part of it. Loyally I strove to give her a daily proportion of my thoughts, but day by day she was becoming more unreal. In my secret heart I had to admit that her death had solved a problem. I felt her loss with bitter sorrow, yet, I fear, I also felt a sense of relief.

Paris seemed to have changed. The streets were empty and many houses were closed. It looked sad. Since I had gone away I had avoided reading a paper, so that I was ignorant of the news of the day. In the leafy wilderness these things didn't matter.

One thing worried me – my money was low. I must see about selling my typewriter. I hated the thought of that. It seemed a confession of failure. But after all, I need only pawn it. I would drop my writing for a while and go to work. That would be hard, though – working in a strange country. Even

if I found a job, wages would be low. Of course, I could make a little money go a long way. If I had a loaf of bread, a bottle of milk and half a dozen potatoes a day, I guessed I could grub along all right. The thought of grub made me hungry, and I decided to lunch at the Cochon d'Or.

As I crossed the Seine I stopped on the bridge to watch some barges pass underneath. In the stern of each a man, tawny and brawny, lolled on the long tiller. In his eyes was the calm look of one who day after day glides between green banks under clear skies. If only I could get that sort of job! But more probably I would have to do like those men on the wharf. They were unloading a barge of ironstone, filling buckets which a steam crane deposited on the deck. The stuff was heavy and jagged, and they had to hustle so as not to keep the crane waiting. I felt sorry for them, and speculated how much more sorry I would feel for myself when I had to do the same thing.

There was, of course, Uncle Cyrus; but I wasn't sending out any S.O.S. messages in that direction. I hadn't seen uncle since our momentous interview, yet I had told Mona that I didn't want any more cheques. "Thanks all the same," I said, in a high-and-mighty moment; "it's up to me to scratch for myself." I couldn't go back on that. I'd rather starve than ask Uncle for another cent. I'd played the parasite long enough.

"Poor Uncle Cyrus!" I mused; "I wonder how the old chap is getting along? Some day soon I must look him up."

Would I find Jessamy Byng at the Cochon d'Or? I hadn't much hope of that. Like the rest of the world she must have gone to the sea, the mountain, the forest. Anyone who could get out would be crazy to stay in town. I would be surprised if she was there.

She was though. Already she had begun her lunch and was eating with a paper propped against the water bottle. I thought she looked a bit faded. Her cheeks were not so bright, and her eyes had a tired look. She greeted me with a smile of surprise.

"Hullo, Bill! Where did you blow in from?"

I told her.

"I wish I'd been there, too. You might have let a pal know you were going, then we'd have tramped together. But no; that wouldn't have done, would it?"

She looked a little ruefully at her hand, and I saw that she was wearing a new engagement ring. I became reserved.

"I'm surprised you haven't gone away," I remarked.

"Lack of funds. I hang on here because I'm down to bedrock. Going away means new frocks, a good hotel, doing things nicely. And I'm just about stony. I make up for it by doing a lot of outdoor painting; but it's not the same, and I'm longing for my friends to return. I suppose I really ought to go, whether I can afford it or not, for safety's sake at least. However, I expect being out in the open so much gives me a certain measure of immunity."

I wondered what she meant by "immunity." She certainly was much thinner and seemed to have lost a lot of her gay confidence. There was worry and weariness in her face, while her clothes were shabbier than ever.

"You may not believe me," she said, with a grimace, "but this is the only square meal I take in the day, and if something don't turn up pretty soon I'll have to cut out this."

"Can't you sell some pictures?"

"Too many are trying to do that."

I thought of my last hundred francs. "I might buy a painting if it's not too dear. I'd love to have something of yours."

She gave me a grateful look. "Oh, no, dear boy. I couldn't let you. On the other hand I'll give you your pick as a present. You know I was rather worried about you when you didn't turn up to lunch for so long. I thought the epidemic might have claimed you. And here you are looking the picture of insolent health."

"Epidemic! Immunity! What does all this mean?"

She looked amazement. "Where *have* you been? Don't you know?"

"No. I haven't seen the papers for nearly a fortnight."

"Why, they're full of it. No one talks of anything else. *The Purple Pest*, some big journalist called it, and it's killing about a thousand a day. On the increase too. Doesn't Paris seem empty to you?"

"I thought everyone was vacationing."

"They've fled the city, all who could. By this morning's paper I see that it has spread to the country towns, and the folks there are fleeing to the villages. Even the most remote little *commune* is talking of putting up a sanitary cordon. It's simply sweeping the country."

"It was bad when I left, but I didn't think it would be as terrible as that."

"Why, it's devastating. It took a sudden jump about ten days ago, and it's been soaring ever since. They're trying to corral the darned microbe. All sorts of philanthropists are coming forward with offers to build hospitals. I see in this paper that old Quin is offering a million francs to the scientist who can produce a preventive serum. The same name as yours, by the way. Ever heard of him?"

"A little," I said cautiously.

"Darn Cyrus Quin! May he perish of the pest!"

"You seem sore against him."

"He unloaded a lot of wildcat stock on dad, or Jessamy Byng wouldn't be wondering where her next meal's coming from. But I suppose that's business. . . . Yes, things are bad and I wish I could get away."

"Let's both go. Let's fly to the forest where there's no purple pest. We'll camp out and have the time of our lives."

"I'd love to, but——" She looked at her ring and sighed. "I hadn't *that* on when I saw you last."

"You're engaged," I said resentfully.

"Yes, a week ago."

"May I ask who is the happy man?"

"I think you saw me with him – Mr. Shote."

I was silent a little, then: "What are you marrying him for? You don't love him."

"Indeed, Mr. Quin; and why don't I?"

"Because – you couldn't."

"I like him as well as I'll ever like anyone, and I won't have you say a word against him. Besides – who was talking of *marrying*."

"But you don't mean——! You wouldn't——!"

"Don't be so old-fashioned. Of course I would. I'm rottenly poor, and I'm fed up with poverty. I've had ten years of it, ten years of shabby, sordid struggle. I taught in country schools in order to save enough for an art education. Now as I am about to succeed, my money is at an end and my friends are too poor to help me. Nothing for it but to go back home and teach in country schools, again, unless——"

"Unless you hitch on to a man with money."

"I'd be a fool to have anything to do with a man who hadn't. I need someone who can take me out of the hole.

I'm sick of struggling – ten years of it. It's wearing me out. Ah, no. I've been poor long enough. I want a little luxury to come my way. I want to be cared for, to continue my art career. I won't let myself be crushed under."

She gave a bitter laugh. "There! Wouldn't I be the idiot to tie up with a poor man! But that aside, I like Shote well enough. What have you against him?"

"I didn't say I had anything against him."

"I feel you're keeping something back."

"Nothing – of any consequence. I may be all wrong in thinking unpleasantly of him. No doubt he's decent enough as fellows go. Anyway you know your own business best."

"I have your good wishes?"

"Sure. I hope you'll be mighty happy, Miss Byng. That's all I can say."

"Thank you for saying it, Mr. Quin. And now good-bye. I think that probably we won't meet again."

"As you wish, Miss Byng."

We shook hands rather stifly, and she went away with her head in the air, but not looking very happy. After she had gone, for a long time I sat in melancholy reverie.

. . . . . .

Of course I knew Shote, though Shote didn't remember me. He'd been too drunk for that. It happened over a month before, one evening about eleven on the Boulevard Montparnasse. At the corner of the Rue Campagne Premier there is a *boit de nuit*, where fellows take girls to supper, ply them with champagne, dance in a space so confined that dancing is chiefly confined to bodily contortions. On the other side of the street is a hotel that lets rooms "*pour le moment*."

On this particular night I saw Shote come out of the restaurant with an American girl of the flapper type. She was about sixteen, daintily dressed and decidedly pretty. But she had evidently taken an indiscreet quantity of champagne, and Shote, on his side, was inflamed with liquor. When he got the girl opposite the unsavoury hotel he tried to pull her in. She resisted, at first in anger, then in tears. Shote grew savage, then abusive. He tried to push her through the doorway, but she wriggled from his grasp.

Sitting on a bench near by I watched them curiously. Shote began to shout foul names at the girl, and she put her

hands to her ears as if to shut them out. Plainly she was frightened, didn't know what to do, was more than a little light-headed with the wine. Finally Shote, losing all patience, caught her up in his arms and tried to carry her through the doorway. She screamed, struggled. In the end she might have submitted, but it was there I intervened.

"Here, cut out that rough stuff!" I said.

Shote released the girl and turned on me furiously.

"What the hell has it got to do with you!" he shouted.

"Nothing, only cave-men stunts don't go down when I'm round. You've got to treat that girl like a lady."

"I'll treat her as I damn well please, the——" A string of oaths.

He made another step towards the frightened girl, when I swung to his jaw. Got him fair on the "button" and dropped him like a stone. I didn't put much force into the blow, but the chap was drunk. It was half an hour before he came round. In the meantime I took the flapper by the arm and pushed her into a taxi.

"Where to?"

"We're staying at the Hotel Mirabeau," she sobbed. "Mother thought he was nice. We know the family. She allowed me to go out with him to show me a little of the Latin Quarter. And he was horrid, beastly."

"All right," I said. "Go home now, and let this be a lesson to you."

I closed the door of the taxi and never saw her again.

. . . . . .

So this was the man Jessamy Byng was going to marry. An utter rotter. I was sorry for her, but – it was none of my business. I might have said more, only one doesn't crab the other fellow. It's not done. Let her go. No doubt she can look out for herself. Yet I liked her, yes, I liked her more than a little.

Looking at the paper she had left, I could see nothing about the "Man Cut in Morsels." Evidently that had been dropped as an item of interest. Or else there were no further developments. Yet later on, seeing the concierge of the next building smoking his pipe at his door, I asked:

"Has our old professor turned up yet?"

"No, but I saw the secretary this morning. It doesn't do

to get too curious about these people. They don't like it."

Once more in my room, ruefully I regarded my typewriter. Sadly I mused:

"Poor faithful friend! And must we part so soon? Ah, if I only could tap out on you some of those stories that came to me in the forest! But I don't seem to have the heart any more. Alas! my hopes! My dreams!"

As I stared dolefully at it my eyes went to a white sheet of paper on which lay half a dozen yellow hairs. The sight of them made me restless. A lust for action gripped me. What should I do with my evening? I could not stay there moping all alone. I was too depressed, and I felt in a mood of recklessness. So, waiting till it was dark, I struck across the city in the direction of the Lapin Vengeur.

CHAPTER VII

AT THE LAPIN VENGEUR

I

It was eleven when I reached the Lapin Vengeur. As I entered I perceived at the table near the door the three men I had already seen with Casque d'Or. They looked aloof and taciturn, their faces expressionless. Yet one felt that their impassivity covered an intense awareness. Perhaps because I was wearing a black sweater buttoned to the chin and a cloth cap well drawn down, they took no notice of me; so, after looking around a moment, I took a seat at a table behind them.

Before long it was evident to me that they were expecting someone, and, by their manner, very eagerly. It was the powerful man with the pock-marked face who showed the first sign of impatience. His strong, stumpy fingers began to drum on the table, and he gnawed his wiry, walrus moustache. Then he looked at the man with the purple face and the canary-coloured eyebrows.

"You're sure he got the note, Biftik?"

"Sure, Gustave. I knocked at the door, but he wouldn't open, so I pushed it underneath. After waiting half an hour, I heard him steal to the door and draw it in."

"Then why isn't he here?"

The dark man whose face was the colour of under-cooked spaghetti, and whose eyes were like small, black olives, except for their gleam of malice, here broke in.

"A dozen things may have happened. The Purple Pest may have got him. He may have trouble with the police. He may have met with an accident."

"Or he may mean to defy us," growled the big man. "Well, we'll wait a little longer, then we'll carry out the other plan. So much the worse for him. . . . Père Fichard, a cigar?"

He was addressing the *patron*, who stood between the bar and the entrance to the dance-hall, with a satchel slung over

his stomach. Père Fichard nearly tumbled over himself in his hurry to fetch the box of cigars. Sourly the big man selected one, bit off the end and lit it.

"Many clients, to-night, Père Fichard?"

"Not yet, Monsieur Lazare. It's a bit early for the crowd."

"Casque d'Or plays well, doesn't she?"

"An artist. In all the city there's not a better team for the music than she and Gomez. She's popular, too. Draws the crowd."

"But she keeps them at their distance."

"Ah, yes. Not many dare get funny with Casque d'Or. *Zut!* Here comes the band of Bibi le Cochon."

About a score of young men and girls had entered, none of them much over twenty. Most of the men were dressed in black, and there was not a collar among the crowd. All wore cloth caps with extra long peaks, and shoes that were thin-soled and light. As a rule their faces were dark and sallow, with hair plastered so sleekly it had the effect of a wig. No doubt, too, this was partly because they had their necks shaved behind. It was notable that their hands, with which they rolled eternal cigarettes, were soft and uncalloused.

All of the girls wore sweaters, each of a different colour. There was an orange, a gooseberry green, a purple, a mauve, a bright blue, a raw pink. Their hair was bobbed around their paint-corroded faces, their eyes bold, their voices rough. Street girls of the outer boulevards, preying on the butchers from the abattoirs and the labourers from the *usines*. I knew the type of these lads, too – living on the girls, spending their earnings, and thrashing them when they failed to earn.

Mere boys, they had been schooled in vice from infancy, and at eighteen were blasé and cynical. They carried arms and fought among themselves. They feared the police, but if chance offered to commit a crime safely they would not hesitate. They would knock a drunken man on the head, or attack in a band the solitary individual in a quiet street. They would even enter a house with a false key, and if the occupant happened to be an old woman, they would not hesitate to squeeze the breath out of her. But they were the small fry of the underworld, sneak thieves and *souteneurs*, not to be confused with the true bandit.

From the dance-hall into which they trooped came sounds of spirited melody. It seemed to be filling up rapidly. The

rough tables that lined the walls were all occupied, and the group standing at the entrance looked vainly for places.

"The Père Fichard's going to have a lively night," commented Lazare. "There will be knives drawn and blood spilt before dawn. The band of Bibi le Cochon and the band of of Bec du Canard are both here. Well, it's none of our affair."

2

Seeing that the interest was beginning to centre in the dance-hall, I rose and joined the crowd at the door. As I paid the franc for admission the Père Fichard looked at me inquiringly. Others of the group also gave me a dubious gaze. It was evident that the habitués of this particular *bal* knew one another, and that a stranger was at once spotted. As I stood there I felt the awkwardness of my position. For a moment I was inclined to retreat. Then a shirt-sleeved waiter beckoned me to a vacant seat at the other end of the hall. Skirting the dancers, I gained it.

"A *ballon*," I ordered.

He brought me a round glass of pale beer. Most of those about me were drinking ordinary *pinard*, which they ordered by the bottle. Cheaper, no doubt. Sitting over my glass, I surveyed the place.

It was a long, low hall with walls a dirty green. Strung across it were light bulbs, some white, some red. Small tables crowded the sides, each capable of holding six. In the opposite corner to me was a raised box for the orchestra. The celebrated Gomez was a grizzled Spaniard with a withered face and the narrow side-whiskers known as "galleries." He strummed on the steel wires of a very large guitar, sonorously but without enthusiasm. That seemed reserved for his partner, Casque d'Or. From where I sat I could not see her very well, only the top of her head, with its mass of pale-gold hair; but once in a while I got a glimpse of her profile, with eyes shining and lips slightly apart.

It was evident she enjoyed playing, for the music she produced was splendid in its fire and rhythm. It was a simple "Java," but she elaborated on the waltz theme till it was glorified. She played it in the minor, in a poignant treble, in jazz, then in waltz time, with strumming pauses, with

runs and ripples. Sometimes the air seemed to be lost in an ecstasy of florid notes; then again it soared, sensuous and irresistible. It seemed as if the girl was amusing herself; mocking the dancers one moment, then humouring them in a sweep of impetuous melody. I was surprised. Never had I thought that the accordion could be played like that.

As the dance came to an end the couples slid to their seats. The oily youths with their sneering eyes went back to their *pinard*, the girls to giggle and chatter in a group by themselves. There was no attempt at politeness; the men simply released the girls where the end of the dance found them, and, turning a contemptuous back on them, left them to find their way to their seats alone. This the girls accepted quite naturally.

Five men put themselves at my table, so that I was crowded to the wall. They looked at me searchingly, then with a certain resentment. In a morose silence they rolled their cigarettes. Yet I realised they were trying to account for me. A sense of helplessness invaded me. It would be so easy to pick a quarrel, and, pinned in there, what chance would I have?

But the beginning of another dance relieved me for the moment of my fears. At the first note of the music each of the men rose, and at the same moment a girl rose and went to him. It seemed as if a man always danced with the same girl. In a few cases where they did not, the man would look across the room at one, and in answer to his "Hist!" she would come to him. It was like master and slave. Then the two would interlace and swing into the dance. Rarely did they speak, going round with a seriousness that was almost weird. Often the man would hold the girl with one arm, while with the other he manipulated a cigarette. They seemed to dance with the precision of machines, gravely, unsmilingly.

What struck me as I watched was that their dancing was devoid of sensuousness. In the night restaurant of my own quarter it had often been frankly indecent. In the crowded space couples would remain almost in the same place, their movements confined to a series of bodily wriggles. Men would hold their partners by the hips, and there would be much dipping and swaying. But in this *bal d'apaches* there was nothing of the kind. The couples showed no sign of sex attraction, holding each other almost indifferently. They

seemed to have no other thought but to keep perfect time to the music. It was like watching performers on a stage.

Then I saw what a gulf there was between Belleville and Montmartre. These people were brutal, but they were not perverted. They would steal and stab, but they did not seek strange forms of sin. The men gambled during the day, and danced with their girls at night. They drank only moderately, and they preserved their virility. Among themselves they fought like tigers, despising the effeminate *maquereaux* of the Butte.

As for the girls, they worked for the men after the ancient manner, loving them in a fierce and stoic way. They frowned on "dope," while among them the Lesbian was unknown. For that the men would have killed them. In their primitive fashion they had a code of conduct that would have shamed their gilded sisters of the Champs Elysées.

All this I realised as I sat there, and with it came my first fascination for the world of crime. Between the vicious and the criminal there may be a mentality that is antithetic. Yet again I wondered: Was not a good deal of this sex callousness due to precocious development? Were not these lads and girls so blasé they were unable to take an interest in one another from the standpoint of sex? Were not their passions sterilised, their emotions burnt out? Perhaps. It might account for their automatic gyrations in which the spirit of the dance for the dance's sake was so curiously realised.

I had reached this point in my speculations when the one-step came to an end. I had meant to slip away during its progress, but had become so interested I had lingered. Now it was too late. Once more I was aware of those sullen, inimical glances, and a slight jostling as the nearest man plumped down beside me. Wisely I ignored it. I would not let them pick a quarrel if I could help it. I was sorry, though, I had no weapon to defend myself if it came to a pinch. I was a good shot and quick with a gun. Give me an automatic and I could handle half a dozen of these vermin. I was making myself discreetly small in my corner when the next dance began.

This time it was the famous *chaloupé*. Holding each other by the shoulders, in some cases by the neck, they rocked and swayed in time to the sensuous music. Yet again it was evident that it was of the music alone they thought. Seriously

they gave themselves up to its rollicking swing, dancing it like a lesson long learned. The only one who showed any sign of enjoyment was Casque d'Or. I could see her more plainly now, with her many-keyed accordion, all mother of pearl and nickel – swaying and swinging, bending over, throwing back her head, laughing joyously – so that she seemed to embody the very spirit of the music.

Once again the dance was done, and still I held my place. But now it was pride that kept me. I was not going to let these animals drive me away. On the defensive, I stared straight at the man who sat beside me. But this time there was no attempt to jostle. They muttered in low tones, with a slang I could not understand, and many side glances towards me. It is hard to say what might have happened had not again the music started.

It was a tango; but a real tango, virile and weird, not the emasculated version one heard in drawing-rooms and restaurants. And in its primitive form these people knew how to dance it. Their hold on one another was violent. The women were pliant, the men menacing. It was the conquering brute and his mate.

In the fierce and throbbing passion of the music I could see Casque d'Or leaning forward, her eyes ablaze. She seemed to incarnate the wild ecstasy of the dance, its sensuous emotion. There came to me a mad desire to partner with her, to bend and swing her, I the possessive male, she the submissive woman. The thought thrilled me, made me clench my teeth. At the same moment the music changed to a weird minor; the white lights went out and the crimson ones went on.

In its picturesque realism the effect was startling. To the wild throb of the music in that crimson light, these denizens of the underworld seemed to rise to their parts. They were fierce animals of the human jungle, and their vibrating brutality entered into the dance. There were sharp cries, half pain, half ecstasy, forms dimly seen held savagely, fury and abandonment. Many were twirling dizzily, their lips locked together. Casque d'Or quickened her music. She was working them up, rousing them to a fury. Now she was laughing triumphantly, and, spurred out of their apathy, they shouted approval. The lights were white again. . . . Then again that quick change to the minor and the ruby light. . . . Fierce faces half seen, the gleam of exultant eyes. Bodies bent

double, swaying this way and that. Guttural oaths and choking cries. Pleasure that was half pain, excitement that was half *delire*. . . . A final wild confusion of whirling forms in that red light, like demons spinning in a bath of blood; final kissing with teeth that ground against teeth; a final triumphant crash of music. . . . The lights went up, the dance was done.

Wiping their brows, the men returned to their seats; the women looked exhausted. There was a high clamour of applause, and in the midst of it I was aware that the man who had taken the place beside me was looking at me with a malicious grin. It was not the one who had sat there previously, but another, more stoutly built, with a face that was grim with bristles. As he licked the gum of a cigarette paper the sneer in his eyes grew bitter. At the same moment the fellow on his other side pushed him sharply against me. He snarled and turned. There was a general laugh. This angered him, but it was against me his wrath was directed.

"Who are you?" he demanded in a hoarse guttural.

I took no notice. He edged nearer; the others watched.

"What are you doing here?" he went on.

Still I did not answer. I was preparing for the next move, uncertain just what I should do. I had indeed been a fool to wait so long.

"Get out!" said the fellow, pointing contemptuously to the door.

I did not move. Others at the near-by tables had turned and were staring at us.

"D'ye hear me," growled the bristly one. "You don't belong here. *Fiche le camp!* Get out and never come back."

I had my back against the wall. Could I obey this runt, slink away like a whipped cur amid the jeers of the others? I looked defiantly at the fellow. Then he took up my glass of beer and dashed it in my face.

Something snapped in me. For a moment I saw red. Although I say it, I am strong. I have big shoulders, and I have been a wrestler. This man was half my height and weight. Still, I was out of training, and it was quite a feat to raise him above my head and dash him, sprawling, on the floor. I scarcely realised what I had done till it was over. There he lay stunned and bewildered. There was a pause, a hush in which every eye was turned on us. Then the other man on

the bench slipped back and drew a knife. So I gripped the bench itself, and swung it, waiting for the attack. Thus we stood a tense moment.

Then there was a scream. It came from Casque d'Or. She had vaulted the box in which she was playing and dashed across the floor. Going up to the man with the knife like an enraged tigress, she struck him across the cheek. With an oath, he would have sprung on her, but there were half a dozen now to hold him back.

"Not her!" cried indignant voices. "Not Casque d'Or!"

It was plain they adored her. "You fool!" roared one. "Dare to touch her and your own skin will suffer."

"Pig!" cried another. "You got what you deserved. If you want to fight, fight me!"

But there was no sign of fear on the girl's face. "Bah!" she said in that husky, level voice, with a gesture of contempt. "Think I'm afraid of that dirty rat? Give me a knife and I'll fight him myself." There were shouts at this, cheers, laughter. "Bravo, Casque d'Or!" "I believe she could, too." "Coco, put away your knife."

Sullenly the man obeyed, but the other on the floor began to pick himself up, and made a fresh move towards me. Then the girl stood between us.

"That's enough," she blazed. "What's the matter with you fellows? Can't you let my friend alone?"

"Your friend, Casque d'Or!"

"Yes, didn't I ask him here to-night? He's my friend, and I defy one of you to lay a hand on him, or you reckon with me, see! He's no coward, and he's not afraid of you, but he's a stranger here and I'll watch you treat him fair."

She turned to the man who had drawn the knife: "If it's a fight you want, Coco, he'll fight you. Won't you fight him?"

I nodded.

"There! I told you. Will you meet him, man to man?"

But Coco hung back. "No, Casque d'Or. If he's a friend of yours, it's all right."

"All right, then. And now we're all friends. On with the dance!"

Turning to me, she said: "Don't go away. I'll be finished in an hour. I want to see you."

I nodded, and sat down. Once more she mounted into her

box, took her accordion in her strong arms and struck a vibrant and exultant chord.

3

When the last dance was over Casque d'Or leapt the barrier and came to me.

There was a feline grace in her stride, and she was pulling on a sweater whose colours resembled those of a leopard. She made me think of a swift, graceful cat-woman. She gave me her hand.

"What brought you here to-night?"

"To see you."

She drew back her hand. "You lie!"

"I don't. I didn't perhaps realise it at the time, but now I know I came to see you."

"You know that it's a dangerous place for a stranger to come alone?"

"To see you, Casque d'Or, I laugh at danger."

"The gallant word!" she scoffed. "I wish I thought you meant it. But that was a dramatic little scene you staged. It was near being a tragedy. If I hadn't walked in at the right moment – Oh, la! la! But, come, you can see me home."

As we passed out of the door of the now deserted café the *patron* looked at us curiously.

"*Bon soir*, Casque d'Or! You played well to-night."

"*Merci!* Père Fichard. To-morrow's pay-day."

"Yes, I'll have your money ready, Casque d'Or."

We went over to the bench on which we had first met. On the way we did not speak. A strange excitement possessed me, and I felt I was on the verge of an adventure such as I had never known.

"Let us sit down here," I said.

"For a little, if you wish."

Again I remarked the husky quality of her voice. It was low-pitched and had a melancholy intonation. As she stood, my eye ran over her. She was slim and supple with a deep bosom and finely developed shoulders. Her face was dead white in the greenish lamplight, with coils of hair that glistened like barley stubble.

"I like you because you're so tall," she said. "Tall men are

rare among us. And I like you because, like all Americans, you're brave."

"Glad you think we are. As far as I'm concerned, I hope you'll never be disillusioned."

"I know I will not, or I wouldn't be here with you now."

She sat erect on the bench, her strong white hands folded in her lap. From her breast to her chin her neck was a curve of beauty like a white flame. Her lips were full and passionate. Her cheekbones were high, so that her cheeks seemed hollow. Her eyes were a brown like amber, and defiant in their depths. And that wealth of hair that was braided and twisted about her head – it was a veritable helmet of gold.

"How do you like my playing?"

"Wonderful! I had always despised the accordion. I had not supposed it capable of real music."

"A good one in good hands is. Mine was left me by my father. He was a professional musician and played many instruments. At one time he was in the orchestra of the Opéra Comique. But he was too fond of absinthe. He went down and down. At last he was reduced to the accordion and the *bal musette*. But he never lacked a job."

"And so he taught you?"

"Yes; but music is in my blood. I feel I could play any instrument. I'd love to play the violin, but just at present the accordion is as far as I've got."

"You have lots of time to learn."

"Still, one must begin young if one is to amount to anything. My mother was a cabaret singer, so it comes natural to me to be an entertainer. She died when I was only three, and it was after that my father became an adorer of the green god. So we sank and sank. I've never known any other life but this. But what about you? You don't belong to our world."

"The way I'm going I may pretty soon."

Her amber eyes stared at me steadily, then she said: "I live in a *roulette* in the Zone. It's some distance from here – so now, Monsieur l'Americain, good night."

As she rose to her feet there was a gleam of mockery in her gaze. She had told me I should see her home, and now she was saying good night. I rose, too. Some strange ferment was at work in me. This girl roused elemental feelings. I scarcely

knew myself. Undreamt-of emotions seemed to surge in me. Was it the primitive calling to the primitive?

At that moment I felt I would like to drop out of my safe world, and sink with her to some dark region of violence and jeopardy. It was curious how she goaded me. At our back was the dark shadow of the fortifications, in front low, leprous houses lit by that greenish gaslight. Looking down I saw a white face in which dark eyes seemed to gleam with malice. On her lips was a Mona Lisa smile. Perhaps it was this that nettled me. I wanted to efface the mockery of those lips with the savage kisses of my own. I wanted to hurt this woman who defied me, to crush her in my arms.

"Good night," she said again.

Then passion surged through me like a torrent and swept me on. I had her, had her close. . . .

With a cry she struck at me, struck with her clenched hand. She wore a cheap ring that cut my cheek. I released her. She was panting, glaring at me. I laughed outright. Aye, even as I wiped away the blood I laughed. Joy possessed me – for had I not proved her honesty?

But the sight of the blood roused the woman in her, and she drew a handkerchief from her pocket.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that. Let me stanch it."

She was raising the handkerchief when suddenly she drew back. The door of the house next to the Lapin Vengeur was opening and three men were coming out.

"Leave me quickly," she gasped. "Don't let them see me with you."

As she shrank into the shadow there was fear in her face. I left her and crossed the street. The three men were now under the light in front of the Lapin Vengeur. One, I saw, was the fellow with the pock-marked nose, another was the red-faced man. But it was at the sight of the third I stared incredulously.

For it was my neighbour, the old professor of the Place du Pantheon.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HOUSE OF HORROR

1

Casque d'or seemed to have vanished, so after a moment of hesitation I followed the three men. Why I did so I scarcely knew. Perhaps the ferment of adventure was still working in me. It was not difficult to keep them in sight, yet twice I saw them look back and quickly slipped into the shadow. Then on the Boulevard du Belleville they leaped into a passing taxi and I lost them.

I was disappointed. The reappearance of the professor had aroused my curiosity. What was the old man doing with these sinister figures of the underworld? Why had he not returned? One thing certain – he was not the "man cut in morsels." What a fantastic supposition that had been!

Well, I might as well go home. Crossing the city on foot, about half an hour later I reached the Pantheon. I walked in its shadow, and was already within sight of my door when I paused. Three men had swiftly turned the corner of the Rue Clovis. I recognised them.

I could see that the professor was leading. The old man rang his door-bell, while the others looked round cautiously. As I went to cross the street they might have seen me, but at that moment the door was opened and they entered.

I waited a little, before ringing in my own turn. As I went slowly up to my room I realised how tired I felt. I would not light my lamp, but would undress and go to bed in the dark. How hot the place was! I threw open the window, and sat awhile enjoying the pure air.

In the professor's apartment the light was on. It outlined the corner of the balcony from which I had seen him look down. No doubt he would now resume that habit, feast his scaly eyes on the sleeping city. There! the light was out again, or nearly so. A very faint glow remained, so that I judged the room was lit by a single lamp. After lingering a little

I decided I had better go to bed. I was about to do so when I heard a scream of terror.

For a moment I stood in doubt; then, as if to further convince me, there was a gasping cry, and the sound of a heavy fall.

Straining to hear more I leaned forward perilously; but the minutes passed and no other sound came from below. Yet I felt that something very sinister was happening down there. Then after a long interval the lights went up again. For another half hour I watched and listened. In vain. There was no other cry of distress. Tired out at last, and deciding it was none of my affair, I threw myself on my bed.

But despite my fatigue I could not sleep. I heard the church bells strike three – three different bells, one grave, one mocking, one sweet. At the last peal I arose, and going to the window once more I looked out. There was no light now in the room below. Darkness absolute. I was going to lie down again when I heard the street door close (for in the silence of the deserted square I could hear the smallest sound). Presently I saw three men cross the street and make their way hurriedly in the direction of the Rue St. Genevieve. Although the light was uncertain, I was sure they were the three I had followed.

There was something mysterious about it all. Evidently the professor had returned for a little and gone away again. I saw what seemed to be he between the two others. But for an old man he was moving with remarkable liveliness, and his bent form appeared to have taken on a new vigour. I watched them till they disappeared into the shadows, then once more I sought to sleep.

What was that? I was hearing a low, stifled moan. I was sure of it. Getting up I listened intently. There! I heard it again, unmistakable this time. In the apartment below someone was groaning in an agony of pain. What had those men been doing? What had they left behind them in the darkness? Again I heard that muffled moan, and there seemed in it now an appeal for aid. It was louder, more drawn out. There was both agony and fear in it.

What should I do? The proper thing would be to go downstairs and get the concierge. But to a sleepy woman my tale would sound fantastic, and I would be laughed at for my

pains. Better ignore the whole thing. And after all, what did I care what became of these people? Why should I mix myself in the business? Then a crazy idea came to me. Why not go down and see for myself? Once before, by some extraordinary chance, my key had fitted that door. It might do so again. It would be easy, and no one would know. Without taking time to reflect, I acted on the impulse. Softly I descended, slipped from my own door, inserted my key in the adjoining one and – opened it.

For a moment that moaning sound had ceased, and though I strained my ears to listen, nothing could I hear. Neither could I see anything. There was no light anywhere, and halted on the threshold I tried to pierce the thick darkness. Suddenly I realised the foolhardiness of my adventure. Anyone seeing me there might take me for a burglar, and would be justified in shooting. Better get back at once. I was retreating when again I heard that groan.

How loud it sounded! Loud yet stifled – as if someone was making a desperate effort to cry for help, yet was choked by some form of gag. Again I heard it, so close now, so poignant in its appeal. It seemed to come from the room that faced the balcony. I took a few paces forward in the darkness, then I hesitated. As I did so the moans grew louder, more insistent. They rose to what would have been, but for their muffled quality, screams of terror. All keyed up, I groped my way in the direction of the sound.

The light! First of all I must turn on the light. As I was fumbling for the switch I advanced into the room. Then I paused, paralysed with fear. I heard that same groan right at my feet. Making an effort I bent down. I started back with a shuddering sigh. For I had touched what seemed to be naked flesh.

Quick! I must find that switch at once. It would likely be at the far end of the room near the door. I stumbled across the floor and groped about the wall. What a pity I had no matches! Ha! There I had found it. In an instant the room was flooded with light.

Then I turned and stood for a moment as if petrified, staring at what I saw. On the floor of the room lay the naked body of a man. His hands and feet were tied with thin cord, and a red handkerchief had been used to gag him. With eyes closed he lay on his side, seeming for the moment to be

unconscious. His body was long, scrawny, ugly, but there was something about him that was familiar.

"The secretary!" I gasped.

Then I saw something that—— Ugh! I am unable to describe. I felt a creeping of the flesh. "It's too – too awful," I muttered, and shrank back. But I must do something, and quickly. Fumbling for my pocket knife I cut the cords at the wrists and ankles, then severed the handkerchief at the neck. As I did so I saw that it was really a white handkerchief discoloured with blood.

There was a divan near. Taking a cushion from it I propped it under the man's head, then snatching up a rug I covered the naked body. If I only had some brandy! By some instinct I darted to a buffet near the door and rummaging in it found what I sought. It was a small flask and half full. I forced some drops between his lips.

The effect was instantaneous. The eyes of the secretary opened and fixed themselves on me. But there was such horror in them I shrank appalled. Under its cover I saw the naked body contract and shudder, and a shriek broke from him.

"Mercy!" he cried. "For the love of God, mercy! It's in the safe, I tell you. He put it there. I swear he did. I haven't taken it. I know no more. All the torture in the world couldn't make me tell more. It's in the safe, the safe!"

"Hush! I've come to help you. I'm a friend."

Wild-eyed he gazed at me. "No, no, you're one of them."

"I don't know what you mean. I'm your neighbour. Don't you recognise me?"

A gleam of comprehension crept into those fear-dilated eyes.

"I heard you moan," I went on soothingly, "and I managed to get in."

"But where are they? The three——"

"Gone, I think. I saw them leave the house."

"But they're coming back. They said they were coming back. Oh, I know they'll be back soon, and they'll torture me again. They'll torture me to make me tell, and I can't tell them any more. They're coming back to get the silver cylinder."

"The silver cylinder?"

"Yes. It was in the safe. He put it there."

"Who put it there?"

"The professor, my uncle. It contained the serum."

I looked over at the yellow safe in the corner of the room. "And they're coming back to open it?"

"They forced me to open it. I had discovered the combination and they tortured it out of me."

I was mystified. "But I can't understand," I said. "Your uncle was one of them."

"No, that was the one they call Crevetto, the Italian. He was wearing my uncle's clothes and made up to resemble him. I was deceived and that was how I came to admit him. I unbolted the door and let him in, then he put a pistol to my head and admitted the others."

"But if you opened the safe for them and they got what they wanted why should they come back?"

"I don't know if they got it. The safe was empty. Then they thought I'd taken it and tortured me again. They've not finished with me, they said. Oh, I'm faint. Give me some more brandy."

I put the bottle to his lips. He went on: "I'm dying. They've killed me. The big man with the knife severed an artery. I'm weak from loss of blood."

"I'll run for help. I'll get the police."

"Not the police. A doctor if you can. But I don't think anyone can save me. I'm done. Listen. Before you go for help I want to tell you something."

"I'm listening."

"It is the professor, my uncle, who is responsible for the Purple Pest. He discovered the microbe and cultivated it. He spread it everywhere. Back there in the laboratory are hundreds of tubes with cultures any one of which would destroy an army."

With a feeling of horror my eyes went in the direction he indicated. It was true then, my muddled memories of my previous adventure. It was not a distorted figment of my imagination. I had discovered the secret of an appalling plot, and all this time I had done nothing. I could only look at him blankly.

"Yes, it's true," he went on with increasing difficulty.

"They're in there, a million millions of the microbe all ready to do their deadly work. But there is a serum. He discovered that, too. Oh, he was wonderful! It will defeat them.

It will vaccinate everyone against them. It was contained in the silver cylinder. That's what mattered. That's what they're after, and if they have it the fate of all of us is in their hands."

"Good God! they mustn't!"

"It's terrible. I wanted the old man to sell his discovery and let us be rich. That was all I wanted, money. But he wanted revenge. I meant to make a deal with France. I swear I did. Now it's too late."

"What's to be done?"

"You must tell the authorities. They must try to recover the silver cylinder. It means the salvation of this whole country. It must be found——" The words died away in a moan.

"I will tell them; but I must get help at once. Perhaps we'll be able to save you yet. Wait. I'll give you some more brandy before I go."

I reached for the bottle and held it once more to his lips, but he did not drink. His head had lolled back and his eyes were closed.

"Come," I said anxiously.

A great shudder convulsed him. Once more he opened his eyes to stare wildly at me. Then they seemed to glaze, and he lay unnaturally still.

"Good God!" I gasped. "He's dead!"

2

There was no doubt of it. The secretary was dead. Terror, torture, and loss of blood had combined to kill him. There he lay, a hideous object, and over him I cowered, the picture of dismay.

My first thought was to run for aid; then the awfulness of my own position dawned on me. Who would believe I had not done it? How I cursed myself for the foolhardy spirit in which I had entered into this adventure. The safest plan would be to slip out and regain my room. But I must be quick about it.

Up to this moment I had not noticed the extraordinary disorder of the place. It seemed as if everything had been turned upside down in a frantic fury of search. The room

was a large one, yet no part of it had escaped. A desk had been broken open, the drawers of a cabinet gutted, the shelves of a bookcase swept clean and the volumes heaped on the floor. Cupboards had been ransacked, and a large coffer emptied of its contents. No place where it was possible to conceal a small object had been overlooked. Even some of the wainscoting had been torn away, and the seats of two easy chairs ripped open.

But from all this frenzy of confusion my eyes went to its centre, the little yellow safe.

It was only about three feet high, and stood in the corner nearest the window. Somehow it fascinated me, so that in spite of my haste to escape from that accursed room I went over to it. At the same moment I became aware of an odour that took my throat with a savage clutch. I looked round, but nothing could I see to account for that stench of corruption. Then I turned my attention to the safe.

"If the old man put the serum in there," I thought, "and if those fellows found nothing, it's because it has some secret hiding place. Of course, if they could not find it, there is no reason why I should."

But because we all have a sneaking idea we are just a little smarter than the other fellow, I went down on my knees and turned the handle. The door swung back. The next moment I was reeling away, glaring unbelievably at the thing I saw.

For from an interior, otherwise as empty as a clean cup, grinned at me – *the severed head of the old professor!*

PART III

HARLEQUIN: APACHE

CHAPTER I

JULOT

1

How I came to my senses and got away from that chamber of horrors I have no coherent recollection.

I rather think I closed the safe again; and I must have switched off the light, for once more I found myself groping in the darkness of the hallway. I was fumbling like a blind man, feeling my way along the wall, when – I made a startling discovery.

On entering I had left the door ajar, so that I could retreat hastily. Now as I reached it I found that it was closed – nay, it was bolted.

My first flashing thought was that someone had entered the house; my second that – someone was standing in the darkness a few feet away from me. I could see nothing, hear nothing; yet I *felt* that someone was there.

Not moving a muscle, scarcely daring to breathe, I stood. Someone was there, an arm's length off, someone hostile, deadly, choosing his moment to strike. My hand was on the bolt, in the act of pulling it back. Instead of doing so I crashed my clenched fist into the blackness.

I might have struck nothing – empty air, but I did not. Ah, no! I connected with a very solid jaw, and I heard a smashing fall. The next moment I was out on the stairway.

"Knocked him for a goal!" I exulted, as I descended in headlong flight. There was no use seeking refuge in my own quarters, and indeed I did not think of it. My one idea was to get away from the place as fast and as far as possible. I had no hat but that did not matter. At the bottom of the stairs I called to the concierge to open the front door, and after what seemed an interminable wait, she released the latch. Thank the Lord I was in the street at last, safe, free.

2

One thing, I had not given the man in the hall a chance to spot me. I must have put him down and out, and my knuckles bled from the blow. For the moment the danger of pursuit was unlikely; nevertheless, after a swift look up and down, I darted round the first corner. I kept on, turning several corners and meeting no one. Then I slackened my pace to a stride.

What had I better do? For the present, at least, I could not return to my room. On the morrow I would slip back unnoticed, collect a few clothes, take my typewriter to a pawnshop and clear out. Things were getting too hot. I'd better make myself scarce for a time.

As it was chilly, I put up the collar of my coat, and plunged my hands deep in my pockets. So slouching along the thought came to me:

"If only I had a peaked cap I'd pass for an apache. A formidable one at that. There aren't many as tall as I. Rotten little runts, most of them."

Then I looked up with a start; for in the shadow a few feet away, one of these same little runts was regarding me intently. My first impression was of piercing black eyes in a death-white mask. These eyes never wavered in their fierce fixity. In a face that looked frozen in its rigidity, they were dark, gleaming points that did not flinch. There was absolute fearlessness in them, and a certain gloomy ferocity.

He stepped forward: "You have some fire, my friend?" he asked, producing a cigarette.

"Alas, no. I do not smoke. I regret infinitely."

However, after some fumbling, he dug a match out of an inner pocket. As he lit his cigarette I was able to take further note of him.

Never had I seen a more perfect specimen of the bandit. He was as small of stature as a Jap, yet with a breadth of shoulder that made up for his shortness. All over, he was of the same sturdy build; yet with not an ounce of spare flesh. He looked strong as a bull, active as a cat. What a prize-fighter he would have made!

But there was nothing of the prize-fighter in his clean-cut face. His features were regular, and rather stern in their expression. Perhaps this was due to his mouth, which was

firm to grimness; perhaps to the truculent uptwist of his jet-black moustache. In his marble-like face it pointed to the corners of his eyes. So perfect was it of its kind it looked almost false. And it was evident he was vain of it; for after inhaling the smoke of his cigarette he twisted it carefully. Then staring up at me from under pointed eyebrows, and looking rather like a pocket Mephistopheles, he said in a husky voice:

"Julot's my name."

He extended his left hand. It was small and white and smooth. For a moment I hesitated, then I said:

"Mine's Harley Quin."

"*Tiens!* Harlequin! What a droll name! But you are a foreigner?"

"American."

"You are out late, Monsieur Harlequin?"

"Sometimes it is necessary. And you, Monsieur Julot?"

For a moment he looked at me piercingly. Then he laid his hand on my arm.

"Come along. The café will be opening soon. We have both the greatest need of a drink."

He walked swiftly, his head bent. Under his pointed eyebrows his eyes were quick and furtive. The policemen we passed in couples looked after us with muttered comments. Almost naturally I had fallen into the gait and manner of my companion.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"To the café of the *clochards*. You don't know Paris very well, perhaps?"

"Not this part."

"Where is your quarter?"

"Belleville," I said at a hazard.

"Every man to his beat. Mine's Bicêtre. I know it like my pocket."

"I can't say that. I've only been in the city a short time."

We were descending some dark and narrow streets, and as I walked by his side I stole a look at him. Again I had the impression of a sinister and ferocious personality. He wore a blue woollen sweater with a knitted tie to match. On his feet were cord-soled shoes, so that he walked with the silent tread of a panther. Yet I had no fear of him. Why should I? I had

nothing to be robbed of. As if reading my thoughts he demanded harshly:

"How much money have you?"

"Not even enough to buy you a drink, my friend."

"Humph! Things are bad then."

"Infernally bad. For a stranger in your Paris it is difficult. Can you not put me on to a good job?"

"I might. But I don't know you well enough."

"Then let us get better acquainted. Nothing would please me more."

"And me, too," he said suavely. Even an apache will not be outdone in politeness. But suddenly he gripped my arm.

"Let me get to the shady side of you, my friend. I do not want those two *flics*, who are approaching, to spot me."

At the angle of the street under the lamplight I saw two dark figures. As I drew near I shot a swift glance at them. One was a young man of medium height but very compact build, with the ruddy and ingenuous face of a countryman; the other was tall and blond with hulking shoulders. Both stared hard at us, and I felt my companion shrink into my shadow. All the length of the street they looked after us. When we had turned the next corner Julot explained:

"Inspectors of the Sûreté, Rigaud and Morand. They belong to the *équipe* of Jean Dulac. Maybe you've heard of him?"

"No."

"One of the most dangerous enemies we've got. It's a wonder he's not had a ball in his skin before now. Not that I would do it. He plays fair and I respect him. But all the same I wouldn't shed tears over his grave. What's your line?"

I determined to play the part he had assigned me. "Anything with money in it. I'm not particular. But after all, I don't know you. Why should I tell you about myself?"

"That's right. We've got to get better acquainted. Come on then and I'll buy you a drink."

We had come out on the Rue Monge and were making for the Place Maubert. After crossing the Place, we plunged into a gloomy and narrow street, the Rue de la Bucherie. Then we turned to the left, up one still more gloomy. On our way we passed many shuffling and furtive figures, men and women all going in the same direction. They formed a regular procession. Clad in rags, covered with filth, they munched food as they went.

" '*Clochards*,' " said Julot contemptuously. "You don't know what *clochards* are?"

"No."

"Creatures of the night—a special class. They have no place to sleep. They pass all their time in certain cafés that are given up to them. Such cafés close at two in the morning and open again at four; so during these hours the *clochards* have to get out. Some make a few sous doing odd jobs round the markets, where they also pick up stale and decayed food. All have their special places in the café, and they spend most of their money there. They sleep there, eat there, drink there. The café is the only home they know. See, yonder at the corner of the Rue Dante is the Grand Café des Clochards."

It was quite large and took up the entire angle of the street. Around its dimly lit door a crowd was already gathered. Many were seeking the seats they had vacated only two hours before. From up and down the street others were approaching. a steady stream of misery that overflowed the pavements. There must have been hundreds of these wretched creatures, men and women, bent and tattered, gnawing greasy crusts from grimy fingers. Sewer-rats. Human compost. From them rose an acrid odour of dirt and decay, the smell of a midden. For the most part they were aged, half-witted derelicts. Bleary eyes blinked in bristly faces, and cadaverous cheeks masked their pallor with filth. Yet all seemed cheerful enough, returning to their places as rats to their holes.

"Only alcohol keeps them alive," said Julot. "They never spend any money on food. They live on the refuse of the markets, and every sou they get goes in booze. The only road they know is that between the Halles and this café. Sometimes they scrap among themselves, and the proprietor banishes them for a few days. But they never try to go anywhere else. They just stand outside the café, looking in at the window and begging with tears in their eyes to be admitted."

"Damned souls peering into Paradise," said I.

"Precisely. Come with me then into Paradise."

We entered, and pushed through the verminous crowd to a zinc-covered counter. The proprietor, a stalwart young man in shirt-sleeves, looked at us appraisingly. Julot ordered coffee and cognac, which we drank standing up at the bar. Topping everyone, I was able to take stock of my surroundings.

Every seat and table seemed to be tightly packed with crapulous humanity. Many were eating the scraps of food they had picked up, many had ordered bottles of *pinard*, many were already drunk. Some were singing, some talking loudly, some sound asleep, their heads fallen forward on their arms. Often these would shrug themselves inside their clothes, as if for a moment to wriggle away from the voracity of innumerable vermin. Sometimes they would rise in their sleep like somnambulists and scratch ferociously. An old woman clawed viciously at her grey hair; the acrid stench of sweat and dirt and stale rags was stifling.

"Rottenness and corruption," spat Julot.

He was sipping his coffee thoughtfully; yet his eyes under his pointed eyebrows never lost their watchful expression. Around us pushed and pressed the crowd. Amid it I observed a number of young men dressed with notable decency. I guessed that this must be a meeting place for members of the world of crime, who mingled with the harmless *clochards*. These might be professional thieves; some, no doubt, were genuine bandits. But among them all there was none so deadly-looking as the little man by my side.

I don't quite know how it happened, but my attention was drawn to an Algerian who was edging over to us. There was nothing to distinguish him from any other Algerian. He wore the same shabby overcoat, much too big for him, the same shapeless cap drawn far down over his ears. His face was yellow, covered with thin bristle, and vicious as a snake. Yet there were a dozen such in the café, workers in the market, no doubt.

This man had wriggled his way till he stood just behind Julot, whose back was towards him. There was something in his manner and expression that attracted me, and I watched him closely. Suddenly I saw his hand come from the pocket of his overcoat, and in it was – a razor. With a jerk he threw it open. Then I saw the hand draw up in his sleeve and slip along the side of the counter in the direction of my companion. Some sense of danger prompted me, and I made a pounce on that stealthy hand. With a quick twist I exposed the open blade.

Julot turned like a flash. He seemed to take in the situation at a glance, and a blaze came into his eyes. There was no fear, only that fierce light. He struck upwards with all his

force, a crashing swing, and with a hoarse yell the Algerian went down. Then Julot seized me by the arm.

"Quick! Let's get out of this."

It seemed as if the crowd, too surprised to think, gave way before us. In a moment we were in the street. We darted down the Rue du Hotel Colbert, and not a moment too soon. From the opposite direction we saw two men dash up to the door of the café.

"Rigaud and Morand, the two lieutenants of that *sacré* Jean Dulac," panted Julot.

3

We came out on the Seine in the shadow of Notre Dame. Plunging down one of the dark and devious streets behind it, we entered a small *buvette* that was just opening. Again Julot ordered drinks. For a while he sat silent and watchful. When his eyes lost their fierce look they were blank and brooding, as if the mind behind them was concentrating on some problem. There was in them imagination, daring dreams. Yet the black moustache above the grim mouth bristled aggressively, and the sharp white face was hard and cynical. Suddenly he seemed to rouse from a trance, and lighted a cigarette.

"Monsieur Harlequin, you saved my life."

"Oh, no, I don't think that. Perhaps he wasn't going to do you any harm."

"Wasn't he! In another moment he'd have slit me up the belly. Then I would have collapsed, and he would have slipped away like an eel. I know these Sidis."

"Did you know that one?"

"Perhaps. Anyway I will next time I see him."

"What was the idea?"

"Revenge, probably," he shrugged. "I served at one time in the Foreign Legion, and had a lot to do with those animals. No doubt it's someone who remembers me in the Bat d'Af' and has it in for me."

I fancied he did not want to continue the conversation, and to change the subject I asked:

"Were you in the war?"

He pointed to a dirty yellow riband in his buttonhole:

"Right through it and ready for another. Suits me, that life. Except the discipline. Give me the dirty, dangerous work, but don't badger me."

I reflected that I had heard the finest fighters in the French army were the priests and the apaches.

"Why do you like war?" I asked.

"It's the risk, the excitement. Besides, I'm a Frenchman and a patriot. I'd give my carcass for my country."

He expressed this sentiment with a shrug, as if it were a mere matter of course.

"You love your country, then?"

"But yes. Naturally."

"And not any money would tempt you to betray it?"

"*Nom d'un chien!* No!"

I studied him carefully. He seemed to be a curious mixture of sentiment and cynicism. Frenchmen are like that. Julot might be a criminal, but he was something of an idealist. There was a long silence between us, then:

"Well, Monsieur Harlequin, I'll leave you now. I have a pressing affair. But believe me I am grateful for what you did. We won't mention it again, but I won't forget. Listen! You are young and a stranger. You do not know this Paris of ours. If you are in trouble and want help call on me. I will give you an address where you may find me."

Tearing off the margin of an old newspaper that lay on the table, he scribbled on it with a stump of a pencil. I thanked him, and put the paper in my pocket.

"All right. I may take advantage of your offer sooner than you think."

"I hope so. I like a chance to pay my debts."

We separated in the neighbourhood of the markets. He plunged into the crowd and disappeared. Once more I went slowly towards the Pantheon. I dared not go up to my room right away, but I hung about till I saw the conciérge come out, carrying a marketing bag. No doubt she was going to buy her provisions. The coast was clear.

Without being seen, I mounted to the studio. Now that I was back in these familiar surroundings the events of the night seemed like a hideous dream. It was hard to believe they were true, and that in the next apartment a murdered man was lying. Hard yet—horrible. Only the thought of my own innocence gave me courage. I must get away.

I washed, shaved, dressed. I packed a valise with clothes; I tidied the studio. Then I took the bag and my typewriter, and turned the key in my door.

On my way downstairs I met the concierge.

"I'm going to the country," I said.

"You're lucky. It's better to go away than to return. Your neighbour came back last night."

"The old man?" I ventured.

"Yes. He was with two others. I did not like the look of them."

"You saw them then?"

"I did. I am nervous these nights. I cannot sleep much, and through the door-curtain I watch all who enter. So many strange things are happening. They went away about three in the morning, then an hour later the old man returned. They did not disturb monsieur?"

"One hears nothing in the studio."

"That is good. I do not like such comings and goings. And these are queer people. Monsieur Legros next door, who is in the police, tells me they need watching."

I was glad to escape, for I fancied the good woman was regarding me as if I, too, were queer. But perhaps that was imagination. I flattered myself I did not show any sign of the night's horror. I gave her five francs, told her to keep the duplicate key of the apartment in case Wistley returned, and hoped I would be back in a month's time.

Then, after selling my machine for five hundred francs, I dropped incontinently out of the world I knew.

CHAPTER II

CASQUE D'OR AT HOME

1

Of the five weeks that followed I have only a blurred memory. I took a tiny room in a scabrous hotel in the Rue Quincampoix. There in that sordid quarter I felt strangely secure. When I went out I wore a sweater and cap, so that I looked like any other *vaurien*. To dull my sense of responsibility I took to drinking again; so that much of my time I spent brooding in narrow *bistros*, wondering what I should do. It was a curious life, animal, elemental. Of course it was not my first acquaintance with the seamy side of things. Had I not been a hobo! Had I not lived on the beach! But this was different – more colourful, more hazardous. I was rubbing shoulders with criminals in an atmosphere of crime.

One thing I did was to send an anonymous letter to the police, telling them to search the professor's apartment. The result was a double headline in the papers and a day's sensation. I did not read the columns of description. Having done my duty in reporting the murders, I wanted to forget the gory part of the business.

Why did I not leave Paris? One reason was the sense of safety I enjoyed. Another was a psychological one. A certain fascination held me. They say a murderer is always drawn back to the scene of the crime he has committed; but why should an innocent man be drawn back to the scene of the crime he hasn't committed? I was. Often I found myself passing on the other side of the Place du Pantheon and looking morbidly up at the house. I was surprised to see how normal everything seemed. The shutters of the old professor's apartment were closed, but the white blinds of my studio gleamed in the sun. Then, in fear that someone would recognise me, I hurried away.

2

It was about this time I began to be haunted by my vision of the Microbe. It came to me one night in a *cauchemar*, a dark shape, the outlines of which were vague and undefined. In the centre it was a dense black, but shaded away to a deep brown. As I lay it seemed to be stationary over me – resting, not on my chest, but a little above it. I had an impression of a blind head, and a multitude of little legs like claws. These clutched and unclutched continually, as the thing dragged itself about on an invisible plane.

Sometimes it would take other forms, but it was in this one it first came to me. With a feeling of unspeakable contamination, of something hideously unclean, I awoke shuddering and gibbering at the dark. The thing I had seen was a microbe magnified a millionfold; was, perhaps, the causal parasite of the Purple Pest.

This impression did not leave me, and future visitations served to deepen it. As I saw about me the growing violence of the epidemic I felt almost guilty. It was as if I were in some way responsible for it. But if I were to tell my story to the police they would treat me as a madman.

Perhaps at this time I was indeed a little mad. Too many of the modern substitutes for absinthe were giving me hallucinations. But the idea grew on me that I must do something, and every day conscience goaded me afresh. It was after a nightmare unusually horrible that I deserted the *bistros* of the Marais and plunged into the Zone.

3

What the *maquis* is to the Corsican bandit the Zone is to the Parisian apache. Once he slips into its mazes the police may seek for him in vain. It would be like hunting a particular rabbit in a teeming warren.

The Zone is that girdle of no-man's-land that separates the city wall from the suburbs. Originally kept bare as a defensive area, with the passing years a singularly vicious race has come to inhabit it. Nomads from the surrounding country have halted their caravans there, finding it a rich harvest ground. Vagrants and vagabonds have camped and

squatted, living like vermin on a dung-heap. The homeless and outcast of the city have sought refuge in its muddle of misery. It is so easy to put up a hutch of clapboards and tar paper, be lord of one's castle, with the wealth of Paris to prey on. So as time went on the lawless character of the Zone became accentuated, until at last it was a very byword for cynical depravity.

To be born in the Zone is to be born to a life of crime; and children abound there. From their cradles they are doomed – those who survive. The boys become *maquereaux*, the girls *grues*. But both are thieves. Besides being a sanctuary of criminals, it is a spawning ground of crime.

For in the Zone there is no law save that of the underworld. The secret police seldom penetrate it. The spaces between its huts are in winter quagmires; in summer, middens. The natives are savage as the dogs they keep to play the part of scavengers. Most of the swarming, half-naked children are tainted with disease and doomed to early extinction. There are no forces of regeneration, so that viciousness and depravity develop unchecked. At the gates of a proud city, a crust of appalling misery, a squalid belt of festering humanity, an outlaw region of iniquity and crime – the Zone.

4

In her *roulotte* in that section of the Zone known as Bicêtre, Casque d'Or was cooking a supper of spaghetti. She had dished the ivory heap, and was sprinkling it with grated gruyere, when she was surprised to see the tall young foreigner she had met at the Lapin Vengeur.

"Hullo, American! What brings you here?"

Eagerly I came forward. I saw her framed in the doorway of her caravan, her dark-blue wrapper hiding the grace of her figure, but her hair bright as barley straw.

"I was seeking you," I said.

"Me! Why?"

"You told me if ever I got into trouble you might be able to help me."

"Did I? And are you?"

Surely it was easy to see I was in trouble – by my haggard face, the weariness of my eyes. She gave me a searching look.

"You must have supper with me," she said gaily.

"Thank you. I'm not hungry."

"Don't be haughty. Come on up. I haven't much, but what there is you're welcome to."

I climbed the little ladder and seated myself on a trunk.

"How did you know where to find me?" she asked, as she finished seasoning the spaghetti.

"You told me you lived in a caravan outside the fortifications. For five days I've been searching for you."

"That's too bad. . . . Yes, I bought this thing a year ago. It's better than a lousy hotel bedroom."

I noted the simplicity and neatness of the interior. Under the little window, with its chintz curtain, was a tiny table with a gay cloth. From a locker she brought a loaf and a bottle of wine.

"All I have. One is not very rich these days."

"It's like a feast to me," I said gratefully; and for a while we ate in silence. It was strange how I felt at home with her. I wondered if she often had male visitors. Hanging by the window was a big brown guitar with steel strings. My gaze rested on it.

"Yes," she said, "it belonged to Pedro, my partner."

I remembered the old Spaniard with the face like a monkey.

"He's dead," she went on. "The plague. I miss him very much. He was like a father to me. Often he has drawn his knife to protect me. I shall have trouble finding another guitarist. They all want to live with one."

I reached for the instrument. In lonely winters in the north I had taught myself to strum a little. Now I tried over the three major chords and a minor one, which were all I knew. The guitar was very sonorous, and I found vamping on it unusually easy. She listened critically, then reached for her accordion, which lay on the bed at the far end of the caravan. Very softly she began to play a simple melody, and I strummed an accompaniment. It was rather fascinating. I enjoyed doing it. Several times she changed the melody, while I supported her with increasing assurance.

"Splendid!" she cried at last. "With a little practice we'd make a first-class team. We could earn our living in any of the dance-halls. Why don't we?"

Curious how the idea captivated me. To be perched on high, making music for a band of apaches with Casque d'Or

by my side; to mingle with the underworld, to get a strange slant on life. And the drama, the colour, the naked virility of it! – all that appealed to me. But no, I put the thought away.

"One cannot do all one wants," I said.

"Ah, yes, I forgot. You are in trouble. You are hunted, no doubt?"

"Haunted, rather."

"Well, then," she said eagerly, "let us get away from this cursed Paris, where only death waits us. Listen! You can hear the church bells tolling, yet people are afraid to gather to pray. They are burning the bodies outside the city gates. If you say the word we will go together. We will tramp and camp and sleep by wild-wood fires. We'll make our living by playing at taverns and village fêtes. Come."

This picture appealed to me more than the other. Adventure with a setting of forest, plain and mountain. Health, change, life in infinite variety. And with this girl. What more could I desire? But again I put the thought from me.

"Let's cross the frontier to Spain," she went on. "Pedro has told me so much about Spain, and we planned to do just this very thing." She bent forward, staring into my eyes with a clear, frank gaze. "Come! I can't go on living alone. Be my man. We are both young, strong, free. We will be happy. We will learn to love. We can be just comrades at first, till love awakes. Speak! Are we not free?"

"That's just it. I'm not free."

"You mean – there's someone else."

"I don't mean that. But – doesn't it seem cowardly to run away when there's so much we might do to help here? Even to carry out the poor wretches and take them to the funeral pyres. For humanity's sake we ought to stand by."

"Humanity has never done anything for me," she said bitterly. "Why should I worry about humanity?"

"Your country then. Would you desert France in its hour of peril?"

"What has that to do with staying in Paris, to be stricken down by the Purple Pest?"

"Everything. What would you say if I told you that the Purple Pest is the work of one man?"

"You rave!"

"I wish I did. What would you do if I told you that not

only has one man propagated it, but that the same man can control it? While he can destroy he can also save. And he does not save. If I told you that what would you do?"

"I would kill that man."

"He has already been killed."

"By you?"

"No, by others who now possess his secret. What they will do with it I do not know. They are criminals of the worst type, and they would willingly sell this secret to the enemies of your country. The breeder of the Pest wanted revenge, but these want money. You think I'm mad, perhaps."

"It sounds fantastic."

"Look around you – is not all fantastic? Thousands dying daily, funeral pyres that light the heavens, church bells tolling, panic, terror. How is it all going to end? Nothing now is fantastic. To-morrow we will all be mad and cutting each other's throats. Authority will give up the job, anarchy reign."

"But those who killed this man – do you know who they are?"

"Yes – and you, too."

"Not Lazare and his band?"

"That's why I came to you. Because you might be able to help me."

"I begin to understand. Tell me more."

I told her everything. It was my only hope. If she chose to betray me, all was lost. But I felt I could trust her. She listened without a word, her face growing in gravity. Her clear brown eyes were fixed on me, and she smoked cigarette after cigarette. Pretty soon darkness fell, blotting her face from me so that all I could see was the glow of her cigarette. When I had finished she remained silent.

"What's to be done?" I demanded impatiently.

"I'm thinking."

I watched the red glow of a cigarette give birth to another red glow, then describe a curve into the night. After a little:

"You're sure the man in the hall did not see you?"

"Reasonably sure. I struck hard. The scar is on my knuckles still."

"Then we may assume they do not know you. That is much to the good. Now please understand – these people are not my friends. I know them only as I know many others.

Perhaps a little better, for Lazare has taken a fancy to me and for the last year he has pursued me. I hate him, but I also fear him. So far I have managed to keep him in check, but it cannot last much longer. It was for that, chiefly, I wanted to get away, – to escape Lazare."

"I would go with you willingly but for this. I must see this through. If it costs me my life I must do all I can to save the country."

"I'm with you."

"I was sure of you. We'llbeat these devils."

"I'm not so sure of that. What plan have you?"

"A primitive one. These people have the secret of the serum. I would act promptly before they can dispose of it."

"How?"

"By killing the whole crowd. Are they not the enemies of mankind? I would crush them with a single blow."

"But the evil is already done, the malady widespread. And if they have the secret of its control, by destroying them we will lose that secret."

"What do you suggest?"

"Perhaps through Lazare I can gain a little of their confidence. Let me try first. If I fail it will be time to take desperate measures. I know they have something very big on hand, something that is going to make all their fortunes. Lazare has already hinted at that. But I don't think they know much. There is a fourth whose orders they obey, and who keeps them in the dark. 'Sinistra' they call him. Although they have worked for him before, they know very little about him. He comes and goes and seems to know everything. They are afraid of him. This much I have learned through Lazare, when wine has loosed his tongue and he has made love to me. Now I will find out more."

"By letting him make more love to you. I don't like that."

"Even if I have to yield it will be in a good cause. But I won't – not yet. Now you are tired. You must lie down on my bed and I will lock the door from the outside. Sleep. Gather strength till I return."

5

I must have slept three or four hours. When I awoke she was bending over me, and I heard her excited whisper:

"There's no time to lose. They have a meeting, all four, at midnight, in the garage of Lazare at Vincennes. It is now nearly eleven."

"What are you going to do?"

"Hide in the garage. Lazare gave me a key of the door, because I promised I would go to him in the early morning. He told me not to come before two o'clock. That was how I found out about the meeting. After it is over he may have to go out in the car. He gave me the key, and told me I could let myself in and wait for him. But first I must see that the coast is clear, he told me. Oh, I made love to him in great style, the brute! I swore this time I would satisfy his demands."

"You must not."

"I won't. But I'm going to the garage. I'll go a little before their meeting, and slip away after they have gone. There's a loft where he sleeps. I can hide there and overhear everything."

"Where is the key?"

She showed me. I took it from her hand.

"It's my job," I said.

"No, give me the key."

In the darkness we struggled for it.

"I'll not let you go alone," she panted. "You must let me be with you. Otherwise I won't show you where the garage is."

I had to promise. Before we started she took from the bottom of a trunk a small revolver.

"Let me have it," I said.

"It's loaded."

I handled it familiarly and saw that it worked.

"I'm used to firearms," I told her. "Now we're all fixed. Come on, Casque d'Or. We'll see this thing through together."

CHAPTER III

THE GARAGE OF GUSTAVE LAZARE

1

THE flooring of the loft was of inch boards, and through a knothole I could look down on the heads of the three men. The small lamp on the table made a poor fight with the shadows, but still I could see the blond head and purple neck of Biftik as he bent over a game of solitaire; the thin, bitter visage of Crevetto as he read the evening paper; the pitted, beaklike nose of Lazare jutting over his pipe. They had arrived in a big touring car about a quarter to twelve, only a short time after we had concealed ourselves.

The loft, on whose flimsy floor I lay flat, was under the slope of the roof and gained by a ladder from below. Lazare evidently slept there, for there was an unmade bed at the far end. The single flooring made the slightest movement dangerous, and I felt as if even our breathing might betray us. Once or twice, indeed, I saw Lazare raise his head and stare sharply in our direction. Thankfully I thought of the revolver. If it came to an encounter they should have reason to rue it. Nevertheless, I would be glad to be clear of the place, for the silence and the waiting were beginning to play the devil with my nerves.

It was Crevetto who broke the silence. He was peering at an insignificant paragraph on the back page of the paper.

"Listen to this," he said suddenly:

"The mysterious murders of the Place du Pantheon.

"Further investigations on the part of Inspector Jean Dulac of the Sûreté have resulted in the discovery that the head found in the safe is that of Professor Hermann Krug, a well-known savant of Swiss origin, and considered in University circles to be a supreme authority on Micrology. This is borne out by a small laboratory at the

back of the apartment, and it is evident that the learned doctor was pursuing his investigations up to the time of his death. What the nature of these investigations was, has not yet been determined. Inspector Dulac has called in the aid of the College of Science and fresh revelations are expected in the near future."

"So Dulac's on the job," said Biftik, in a tone of contempt. "The slowest, stupidest man in the Sûreté."

"He has the devil's own luck, then; for he gets results," grunted Lazare. "He makes more arrests than any other man they've got."

"What I wonder," said Crevetto, after a pause, "is – what was the old man after? And why did Sinistra have us croak him and his assistant."

"Sinistra wanted to get hold of something they possessed, and also to prevent them betraying certain secrets," said Lazare.

"There's Fischer and Klein, too," broke in Biftik. "Now rotting in the ooze of the Canal St. Martin. They'll not betray any secrets."

"Sinistra doesn't believe in half measures. There only remains the fifth man, the one that left his mark on you, Crevetto."

"A big fellow, that," said the Italian, rubbing his jaw ruefully. "The most dangerous of the bunch, I expect. I wouldn't like to meet him at close quarters again."

"That's the last of them. When we get him, our job's finished," said Biftik.

"Is it," said Lazare thoughtfully. "Who is Sinistra, and what's his game? That's what I want to know. He keeps us all in the dark. He hires us to get hold of certain people for him. When we've got them he has a little persuasive talk, which I suppose results in the particular information he wants."

"He's a cruel devil," said Biftik. "They're in a pretty mess when he's done with them."

"That's what he calls the Venezuelan method of extracting information. But what I want to know is: what is the information he's after, and what's inside this silver cylinder we tore up the professor's apartment to find? True, he pays us like a prince, but again I ask: Who is Sinistra?"

"He's well known in Berlin and in Rome," said Crevetto.

"In both places he has a gang ready to do his work. But he's rich and pays us handsomely, so what's the use of trying to double-cross him. Besides, I'm afraid of Sinistra."

"I'm not," grunted Lazare. "No man's knife-proof."

"What good would that do us – killing the goose that lays the golden egg. Only Sinistra's more of a vulture."

"Perhaps you're right," grumbled Lazare. "But even if it's only from curiosity, again I ask: Who is Sinistra? And I mean to find out."

There was another long silence, but suddenly it was broken by Biftik. Looking sharply at the ceiling he exclaimed: "I'm sure I heard something move up there."

Lazare too had heard. For a moment he seemed startled, then a gleam came into his eyes.

"It's nothing," he said carelessly. "There are rats in the loft. I'm too lazy to buy poison, I suppose."

"I would have sworn it was something bigger than a rat," said Biftik. "Let me take a look."

But Crevetto, who was staring at Lazare in a queer way, interposed:

"No, he's right. I know the sound of rats."

Biftik was satisfied, and resumed his game. Crevetto turned over his paper. All of the front page was taken up with accounts of the ravages of the Purple Pest. Crevetto regarded it with distaste.

"It gives me the creeps," he said. "I want to get back to my own country out of this accursed France. I don't mind death by violence, but to perish like a rotten dog on a dung-heap – that's what sickens me. As soon as we get this job finished I make for sunny Sicily. I can buy a castle there and be a lord."

"As soon as we get the fifth man, the fellow that gave you the jolt on the jaw. Well, we've not got him yet."

"Hush!" said Biftik again. "I'm sure I heard a noise above us. I'm going to see this time."

He slipped an automatic from his hip pocket and made for the ladder, but Lazare was before him.

"If there's to be any searching," he said firmly, "I'm to be the one that does it. Give me that pistol."

There was an embarrassed, almost sheepish look on his face as he started to climb the ladder. He had just got his foot on the first rung when he halted.

"Someone's knocking."

All three turned. Lazare went to the door and opened it cautiously. Just as cautiously a man slipped in.

2

With my eye glued to the knothole I could see nothing of the newcomer, save the folds of a long black cloak and the top of a black felt hat. Then I heard Lazare say:

"Sit down, will you not, monsieur."

The newcomer took a chair near the door. When he spoke I was surprised at the refined suavity of his voice.

"Thank you. I am unavoidably late and a little tired. But I hope you have good news for me. Have you traced our unknown adversary?"

Ruefully Lazare shook his head. "We have had no luck so far. We are combing the underworld for a man of his description. We may get him at any hour."

"Why the underworld? Why assume that he is one of yourselves? You can take it from me he is a foreigner. It is among the associates of Fischer and Klein you should seek."

He addressed Crevetto. "Have you no definite description of this man to give us?"

"I entered, monsieur, at the very moment he turned out the light, and I only got one flashing glimpse of him. The most I can say is that he was very tall and young and strong. I think he had a clean-shaven face and bold features. If, as you suggest, he is a foreigner then he conforms more to the American type than to any other."

"Not much to go on. However, I think you can limit your search to foreigners. Hire men in every quarter to report on all strangers that answer this description. I will give you all the money you need. If he is still in the city he cannot well escape us. Granted there are a thousand men like that, by elimination we will find the one we want. And we've got to find him, or all that has gone before will be vain. Listen! You know I don't stick at much, and this time I am prepared to go to desperate lengths. Well, the moment you get me this man, and I get from him the information I need I'll pay you over a million francs."

An exclamation from Biftik and Crevetto; silence from Lazare.

"You don't want to lose that million," went on the voice silkily. "Get busy then. Increase your efforts tenfold. And remember, if in a week's time you have not procured him for me, I withdraw my offer."

"We'll find him," grated Lazare. "If we have to mobilise the entire underworld to do it. In a week's time, if he's alive and in the city, you'll have your man."

"Good. And another thing – I'll have no prying about myself. I know you're curious about me, but it won't get you anywhere. At this moment I am at your mercy. I am unarmed, and you might kill me. But what if you did? There are no papers on me that would tell you who I am. I will tell you this, however: I have much power, and if anything happens to me you will surely perish. The slightest attempt at treachery on your part will recoil on your own heads. As you waited for me, I know you were talking about me, and I know what you were saying. There is little I don't know, so beware."

"No need to threaten us," said Lazare sullenly. "We'll play fair. We'll——"

He paused, a startled look on his face. But it was the man in black who spoke. That silken voice had the sudden force of a pistol shot.

"Who's there? I heard a movement in the room above. Someone is hidden there. What does this mean?"

With a quick movement he overturned the table. The lamp crashed to the floor, leaving the place in utter darkness.

"Shoot, Lazare. Shoot overhead," said Biftik almost in a whisper. "There's someone lying on the floor."

But Lazare did not move. The silence was drawn out, as if all were listening, straining their ears for another sound. Then as they stood tense and alert, a clear voice came down to them.

"No, no, don't shoot. It's I, Casque d'Or."

With a curse Crevetto flashed a torch at the ladder that led to the loft. The girl was already half down.

"How you have frightened me," she whimpered. "I came here to meet Gustave. He asked me to come. I got so tired of waiting. I was sleeping. I heard nothing till you spoke about shooting."

In the light of the torch she was groping her way towards

them, the picture of bewilderment and fear. The man in black had vanished.

"Tell them, Gustave," she faltered. "Tell them you told me to come."

"Is this true?" said Crevetto harshly.

"Yes," snapped Lazare. "But, you fool! I told you not to come till after two in the morning."

"I'm sorry, Gustave. I had nowhere to go. I didn't understand. Please forgive me."

"That's all right," said Lazare roughly. "The girl came at my invitation. She made a mistake in the hour, that's all."

He clutched her by the shoulders, thrusting his fierce face into hers. "You heard nothing of what we were saying? You swear it."

"Nothing, Gustave. I swear it. I was sleeping."

"I'll answer for her," said Lazare. "She's one of us now."

Crevetto said nothing, but Biftik grumbled.

"You should be more careful, Gustave. We can't afford to take chances like that. Suppose she had overheard. And what will the Signor think?"

"You leave him to me. I'll explain it. And now let's all get out of this. I'll drive you in the car to Montmartre, and we'll have a swell supper at my expense. We'll celebrate the *fiancelles* of myself and Casque d'Or."

CHAPTER IV

THE TENACITY OF TEU TEU

1

All day I had been looking for Casque d'Or.

Her sudden action in descending at the supreme moment of danger had stupefied me. Yet no doubt it had saved my life. At first I had wondered what she was going to do; then as I listened and realised that she had bluffed them into believing she was alone, relief came to my trembling nerves. Although I had been prepared to sell my life dearly, I was grateful for this respite. After they had gone and I had made sure the coast was clear, I found my way back to the city.

Crawling under one of the huge tarpaulins that cover the piled sacks of cement on the banks of the Seine, I closed my eyes and lay like a dead man. When I awoke dazed and wondering, it was broad day.

My first thought was of the girl, and after a wash in the Seine I set out to find her. Her caravan was closed. Though I knocked cautiously there was no response. I tramped across the city to the Lapin Vengeur, and prowled round it at a discreet distance. No sign of her. Eating at a *bistro* on the Rue Mouffetard, I tried to consider the situation as calmly as possible.

It was plain that those people wanted me badly. They were unaware of my identity but that could not last long. In a few hours the drag-net would be out, and all the resources of the underworld exhausted to find me. No suspicious individual would be overlooked. My height alone would make me conspicuous. As I walked I slouched forward, trying to make myself seem smaller. With my cap pulled over my eyes, and my clothes crumpled and stained with cement, I imagined I looked disreputable enough.

Why was this Sinistra so desperate to get me? Was it

because I knew too much? Or was it because I knew something he did not? One thing was curious – Lazare and his band were ignorant of their employer's purpose. They were mere tools, and Sinistra was the only one that mattered. If I could kill him and get possession of the silver cylinder before he could dispose of it, all might yet be saved. But I must find Casque d'Or without delay.

Then there was my anxiety as to what had happened to her, an apprehension that increased to torment as the day grew older. And with my growing weariness, despair descended on me; so that it was very dejectedly I returned to Bicêtre and circled round the *roulotte*. At last I took refuge in the Café du Rome, from one of whose windows I could glimpse the closed door of the caravan.

The Café du Rome was a large shed, composed of clapboards and hoardings, patched with tin and tar paper. Yet, amid the crazy dilapidation of the shacks that packed it in, it was like a château. It belonged to an Italian who had also acquired most of the cabins in the neighbourhood. He lived like a feudal lord on rents that yielded him a hundred per cent. on his investment. So that even in this region of free land and anarchy, the hated capitalist had asserted himself.

The Café du Rome was the headquarters of an Italian gang of honest cut-throats, who were exploited in contract labour by the proprietor.

He was a rat-faced, desiccated man, with a maternal mountain of a wife, and two effulgent daughters. Many knife duels had been fought over these girls, but they were destined in marriage with wealthy wine-merchants of the city. Like all who succeed in the underworld, their father had bourgeois ideals.

Over a bottle of cheap wine I took stock of the place. A dozen Italians, who looked like desperadoes, but were probably day labourers, were playing some queer counting game with their fists and fingers. The proprietor and three others were thumbing a greasy pack of cards of mediaeval design. He looked at me keenly, and from time to time raised his eyes to watch me. To him I was either a crook in hiding, or a detective after one. He shot a warning look at his daughter behind the bar. While acting as a receiver for stolen property, he also was an informer for the police.

The girl behind the bar had a black eye, that she persistently informed each newcomer she had obtained by falling against the coal scuttle; which information was received with polite but incredulous sympathy; for it was known that the two sisters fought like welter-weights. Now she came over to me and explained the nature of her accident. She did not want, she affirmed, a stranger to get a false impression of her.

"You are a foreigner?" she hazarded.

I nodded.

"Looking for someone, no doubt?"

"Yes. Do you know Casque d'Or?"

"Who doesn't? She often comes in here."

"Where might I find her?"

"She was in her *roulotte* all morning. She went away a few moments before you came."

Curse the luck! I had just missed her. "Have you any idea where she went?"

"Yes, she came in in passing, and said that if anyone inquired for her, she was going to the Rue de Lappe."

That was all I wanted to know. Drinking my wine at a gulp I hurried away.

2

The Rue de Lappe I knew by reputation only. It is a narrow street near the Bastille, and famous for its *bals musettes*. There are more dance halls on the short Rue de Lappe than in all the rest of the city. From every second door issue the gay strains of guitar and accordion, and beyond the bars are glimpsed the dim smoky interiors. The garish lights flood the street which is little more than a lane, and every type of the lower life of Paris is to be seen in its jostling throng.

It was not strange that Casque d'Or should come here, where she must be well known. I had good hope of finding her, and every moment I expected to see her *gavroche* face under her coils of oat-bright hair. But all I saw were rake-hell youths and raffish girls, swaggering bullies and slinking sneak-thieves; the quiet, contemptuous bandit; the *pierreuse* no longer predatory, but seeking only to enjoy. It was the underworld at play.

Despairing of finding her in the street I began to search

the dance halls. They were of all sizes and grades, from the gaudy gilt *salle* where a trap drummer supplemented the usual guitar and accordion, to the low-ceilinged *bouge* where the shirt-sleeved *patron* sawed a fiddle and jangled a collar of bells attached to his ankle.

I lingered in a *bal musette* of the élite order. It was aflame with amber light, and the bar was as gaily decorated as a boulevard café. All the women wore hats, the men coats. Starched collars and bowlers were even to be seen; but for the most part they had gaudy scarfs and caps of a loud check pattern. The men smoked all the time, the girls not at all. Everyone drank abstemiously, and often of gaily coloured syrups. Most of the girls appeared to have their own men, though a few seemed unattached. Among these was a negress dressed entirely in flaming scarlet. The music was full of fire, and each dance was divided into two parts, during which interval men with satchels collected the money.

From this palace I passed to a den under whose low ceiling sweaty couples swung dizzily. The only musician was a brutal-looking ruffian throned on a tiny platform above the heads of the crowd. Yet he played the accordion divinely. He delighted in florid excursions into the treble, and fascinating effects in the minor. Here the naked light shone on the greasy hair of the women, and the lean, mottled faces of the men who exploited them. In that narrow space they were a huddle of close-linked, wriggling bodies. It was not in a *bouge* like this I would find Casque d'Or.

As I went from place to place I realised that each had its special character. There were some that bore the title of *bals des familles*, and seemed to be frequented by the class that lives by raking in the garbage cans of the city. In others there were an undue proportion of women. I was struck by the number of girls dancing with other girls. If on a rare occasion they danced with a man it was with an air of distaste. The same couple always danced together, with evident enjoyment and even affection. Usually one of them was strong-featured and dressed after the manner of a man; while the other was clinging and supple. . . . Then in a hall near the end of the street I found the most curious scene of all.

It was not large, this hall, but it was densely packed. The strange thing was that, though there were half a hundred

men, there were not half a dozen women. And the men were decidedly queer. Their cheeks and lips were painted, their hair oiled and curled. Their waists were drawn in, their hips prominent. The hands they flicked about with vague gestures were manicured to the rosy finger-tips. They spoke in tones so high that their voices were inclined to crack. Usually their figures were slim and supple, and they had the mincing manner of affected schoolgirls.

The fashion of their dress was even more peculiar. Just as in a former dance hall I had seen girls who imitated men in their garb, so all these men seemed to imitate women. They wore coquettish hats of the finest velour, daintily tied scarfs of foulard, and shirts of embroidered silk. Their suits were of fine cloth tightly tailored, their silk socks displayed slim ankles. Their shoes were of suède or patent leather.

So much for sartorial elegance – it was their conduct that amazed me. It was almost caressing. As they pecked at one another with rosy finger-tips I saw that they wore rings of fine workmanship, set with turquoise, tourmaline and opal. They walked with small steps and a slight inturn of the knee that gave them a sinuous gait. They pinched each other playfully, and called themselves by feminine names. One would ask for a dance with the grace of a cavalier, the other accept with the coyness of a maiden. During the dance they would cling closely, and gaze languishingly eye to eye. They danced with a mincing daintiness, a coquettish head-twisting. They pursed their painted lips, arched their thinned eyebrows, flirted with each other outrageously. In some cases their eyes were glassy with cocaine.

Many were slim boys with straight, delicate features. Some wore their hair long and fluffed out, so that at first I took them for girls in masquerade – pretty girls, too. In most cases the same couple danced together, never missing a number. At first I thought I was beholding some kind of travesty, then the seriousness of it dumbfounded me. These men were deliberately aping women, living the part. As I saw that some of them were eyeing me coyly, and seemed to be making a movement to cut off my retreat, I backed hurriedly to the door. Just outside were two *sergeants de ville*, who marked my bewildered face.

"Ah! monsieur, it is only the Taverne des Tapettes," said one with a laugh.

3

Despairing of finding her in the Rue de Lappe, I took a narrow alley leading from it, and arrived in a slum of the worst description. It was unlighted save at each end, but I saw that it was called the Passage Thierry. I was hesitating to explore it, when from a dimly lighted *bistro* I heard the sounds of an accordion. Peering in at the window, I saw the bright yellow coils of Casque d'Or.

As I entered she looked up, but there was no sign of recognition in her face. It was very white, with a stony look of misery. Her eyes seemed cold and dead, and they were gazing at the bar where a man stood with his back to us. I recognised Lazare, and hastily retreated.

In the gloom of the street I could still see her. Lazare was sitting by her now. He had an arm round her, and his manner was insolently possessive. I could plainly see the shrinking horror which she tried so hard to control. From time to time she kept looking out of the window, so I crossed the street to where the curtained door of another dance hall made a red splash on the pavement. Above was the sign: Bal du Petit Balcon. I had heard of this place as notorious for its danger and depravity. Watching for a moment when she glanced out and could see me in that red glow, I entered.

The lights of this *bal musette* were of alternating colours, red, green and yellow. As I sat down the red changed to green, making the dancers strangely ghastly. The music consisted of the inevitable accordion and a sort of bagpipe played by a man in the costume of a Savoyard. The dancers here were more typically apache than in any other place I had visited. The caps of the men were violent of check and raking of brim. The girls were the aproned gigolettes of stage and story, with many combs, red heels and crude colours. In the changing lights I might have been looking at a scene in some lurid drama of the underworld. I ordered a grenadine and waited with anxiety.

Had she seen me? Would she come? How she seemed to shrink from that brute's caresses! With sudden rage I clutched her revolver and crushed it till it bruised my hand. At that moment I was capable of desperate things. In an upwelling of primitive savagery I felt I could kill Lazare for the possession of this girl. But with such vast issues at stake

it was no time for private feuds. I must keep cool, hold myself back.

Suddenly the door opened and Casque d'Or stood there. She crossed the hall, looking at everyone but me. Then she sat down at the next table.

"I wanted to be sure there was no one I knew," she said. "You got away from the garage all right?"

"Yes, you saved my life."

"My own, you mean. Do you think if they had found me up there with you I would be alive at this moment? You don't know them."

I dared not ask the price she had paid. I never would dare. I felt very humble as I looked at her. She sat with head bent in a stony silence. After a bit I said:

"What's to be done now?"

She gave a shrug. "I don't know. Lazare and the others are just tools. They know nothing. Sinistra is the one."

"And to get at him?"

"That's not easy. They've tried to trace him, but he has a fast black car in which he disappears after every meeting. Useless to follow him."

" Could you get no description of him?"

"A tall, thin man, so dark of skin he looks like a mulatto. I tried to see him last night, but he had gone. The only way I can help you now is to tell you when they have another rendezvous."

"But how?"

"There's an old woman who lives in a drainpipe on a vacant bit of ground close to the Place d'Italie. You can easily find it. She is a friend of mine. Leave a note with her if you wish to see me, and I'll do the same. Go every day. I'll tell her. . . . *Mon Dieu!* I wish I'd never met you," she added harshly.

"I'm sorry I dragged you in. But you were the only one who could aid me; and, when I see these poor devils dying like rotten sheep, I feel I'd do anything to save them. Well, you can back out even now."

In her harsh way she checked me.

"No, I'm with you. But we mustn't be seen together. We——"

She stopped, and I saw her eyes, with a startled expression,

rest on the door. "Pretend you don't know me," she breathed.

I thought it might be Lazare, but it was the Italian Crevetto, with his twinkling, sloe-black eyes set in a face pale as lard. I half turned my back on the girl. It was too late. He had seen us talking.

"Hullo! Casque d'Or," he hailed her. "I'm looking for Gustave. Have you seen him?"

"No, he left me a little ago. He told me to meet him in an hour beside the Metro in the Place de la Bastille. He has gone for his car."

"Good! I'll see him there. Who's your friend?"

"Some sort of foreigner. He asked me to dance."

A foreigner! Crevetto seemed to take a sudden interest. He looked at me thoughtfully, then he drew a chair up to our table and sat down.

"A friend of Casque d'Or is a friend of mine," he said, with a trace of mockery. "Good evening, monsieur."

I nodded curtly. He was staring at me hard now, and seemed to be controlling some excitement. Already I felt uneasy.

"Monsieur, your glass is empty. Will you do me the honour to drink with me?"

To refuse would have been to arouse suspicion. "You are too amiable, monsieur," I said.

"*Garçon!* Champagne. The best you have."

As we waited for the wine he continued to regard me with that deliberate scrutiny. There was something jeering under it. On his lean jaw I could see the scar where I had struck him, and, as a sullen rage glowed in me, I wanted to strike again. Under the table I clenched my hands. Oh, to wipe the sneer off that colourless face! With quiet intensity the girl was watching us.

"You are like me, not a native of Paris," he went on. "But you are not of my country."

"I am from America."

"A wonderful land. It is my misfortune not to know it. I thought, though, that all Americans who came to Europe were rich."

He was looking with some contempt at my clothes, and again I clenched my hands under the table.

"I am not rich, that is evident."

"Pardon! But it is strange to see an American in the Bal du Petit Balcon. It is not well known. Besides it is not safe for them. You are the first I have ever seen here."

"Perhaps that is why I come."

"Ah! You wish for a moment to remain inconspicuous as far as your compatriots are concerned."

"Sometimes one has reasons."

The waiter had brought the wine. "Quite so. Well, let us drink. Here's to our meeting, Monsieur l'Americain. May you continue to escape your enemies."

I raised my glass to do justice to this excellent sentiment, and as I did so the eyes of Crevetto became fixed. He was looking at my knuckle, on which was a small purple abrasion. He drew a long, hissing breath.

"Come," said Casque d'Or suddenly. "Monsieur l'Americain, you said you wanted the next dance with me. It is already beginning."

She rose, and I joined her. We went once round the room without speaking. As we passed Crevetto she said:

"You dance badly, monsieur. I thought all Americans danced so well."

"Alas, mademoiselle, my education in that respect has been neglected."

Then when we were out of earshot of the Italian she whispered: "He recognised you. You must get away from here without being followed."

"Yes. How?"

"There's a lavatory at the back that gives on a court. Watch your chance and escape that way."

When the dance was finished we found Crevetto no longer at the table. He was in conversation with a man who lounged comfortably against the bar, a long, lank man, rolling a cigarette and listening with a grin. Presently the Italian returned.

"I was talking to Teu Teu. He's just out of jail. Do you know Teu Teu, Casque d'Or?"

"I've heard of him," she answered coldly.

"Everybody's heard of Teu Teu," he said, with a curious laugh.

As I gazed at the man of whom everybody had heard, I saw the usual *costeau* of the outer boulevards, dressed in the brown overalls, with rope-soled canvas shoes. He was a type

that would be handier with a knife than with a pistol. Teu Teu had lantern jaws and gimlet eyes. He looked tough as steel wire.

"Come, Crevetto, you must have this next one with me," begged Casque d'Or. "We will show this American how to dance."

The Italian seemed to be tempted; and perhaps, too, he wanted to speak privately to the girl. He rose, and they glided into the tango. The lamps that had been red now changed to green, and in that weird light I made for the lavatory. It was a long washroom with two basins. Between them was the window. It raised easily, and in a moment I was in the court. Quickly I closed the window after me. Free!

4

The court was quite dark, but at its farther end a faint glow indicated an outlet. I found there a narrow passage, and, running down it, arrived in the Rue de Lappe. Mingling with the crowd, I came out on the Rue de la Roquette, and gained the Place de la Bastille.

Here were fewer people, so I quickened my pace. I crossed the Place, then struck down the deserted Rue Henri Quatre in the direction of the Seine. Now I hurried, even breaking into a run; but, as I saw two policemen regarding me suspiciously, I slowed up. I kept along by the Seine till I came to the Chatelet; where, taking a seat on the terrace of a little café, I ordered a *bock*.

I had but just raised the glass to my lips when I put it down untasted. My heart had given a leap, and was knocking unpleasantly. I was seeing something that made me doubt my eyes. There, leaning against a lamp-post, rolling a cigarette, with a quiet grin on his brown face – Teu Teu.

Leaving my beer untouched, at a brisk pace I made off up the Boulevard Sebastopol. I had gone only a hundred yards when I halted and looked back. On the other side, keeping well in the shadow, was Teu Teu. I could not doubt now that the man was following me. How to shake him off?

A little farther on a solitary taxi stood at the curb. The driver had just delivered his fare and was making for the nearest stand. I jumped in.

"The Arc du Triomphe," I told the man.

Looking through the small window at the back, I gave a chuckle. I could see Teu Teu running. I could imagine the rascal's chagrin and dismay. It gave me a keen pleasure to elude him.

The driver chose to take the Grand Boulevards, and we were held up at several crossings. But when we gained the Champs Elysées we made good time. Looking down the long avenue to the dazzling Place de la Concorde I saw for the moment no other taxi. Yes, there was one that had just swung in, and was coming on at a terrific pace. It was one of those monoplace affairs, a fast little devil that would probably pass us. However, on the long hill it slackened speed, and we were the first to arrive at the top. I paid my driver, and passed under the Arc du Triomphe. But I saw that the monoplace had also stopped, and my heart seemed to tighten; for the client who sprang out was Teu Teu.

Thoroughly excited now, I darted across the street to the station of the Metro. There was a chance that I might get into a train before Teu Teu could reach it. I took the steps three at a time, thrust a franc at the woman for my ticket, and flung myself down the stairway. A tired employee punched my ticket, and pantingly I peered along the tunnel, with its vista of yellow lights and gleaming rails. I could look clear to the next station, where a train was just leaving. Now I could hear its vibrating thrum, see its headlights grow bigger. At his gate the ticket-puncher seemed half asleep. No sign of my pursuer. . . . Now the train was drawing up, and the gatekeeper had closed his wicket. I stepped into a first-class compartment. Had I escaped?

Then suddenly I saw Teu Teu tumble down that long stairway and rattle at the gate. The gatekeeper shook his head: "Too late." But Teu Teu whispered something to the man, who looked startled and threw back the wicket. Just as it was moving out Teu Teu caught the last coach.

A sense of impotence overwhelmed me. I could never shake off this terrible fellow. Standing at the door, I watched the passing stations, trying to make up my mind to slip out at one of them at the last moment. There might be a chance to mingle with the crowd unseen by Teu Teu, who would be carried on.

At the Gare d'Italie I decided to make the effort. A

number of people were changing, and there was some confusion. Keeping well out of sight of the train, I mixed with the crowd, descended the steps and found myself once more in the street.

Hugging the shadows, I ran down the Boulevard d'Italie. Overhead was the Metro, which here runs above ground. Its great stone piers hid me, and I dodged in and out as I ran. I reached the next station, which was opposite the Rue Nationale, and, concealing myself behind a pillar, looked back. Alas! not a hundred yards away, ineluctable as Fate, was that swift, shadowy figure. I darted down the Rue Nationale which was still well lit and fairly populous. I made no effort now to conceal my haste. I raced. When I had passed the busy beginning of the street and reached a quiet section, I looked back once more. There in the glare of the lights was Teu Teu.

Again I turned, and was going to bolt blindly on, I knew not where, when I felt a hand seize me like a vice, a voice hiss in my ear.

"Come this way. What's all the hurry?"

CHAPTER V

JULOT SEEKS A JOB

1

Taking it for a fresh adversary, I swung round, and, with a snarl, drew back my arm to strike. I would settle with this one, anyway. But to my amazement I saw a familiar face.

"Don't hit," said Julot huskily. "I'm not insured. What's the trouble, Harlequin?"

"I'm being chased."

We were standing at the entrance to an unlighted court. A rusty gate, one-half of which stood open, made it semi-private. Inside were piles of garbage cans filled to overflowing. The houses of the court were leprous and sullen, but from a few windows came bleary light. Julot pulled me within the gate.

"Come with me," he snapped.

We ran down the court, and about half-way he darted into an entry. It was one of many – all black and silent. The pitchy darkness engulfed us.

"Keep still a moment."

As we waited we heard Teu Teu come to the gate, pause as if to make sure that his quarry had not continued along the street, then turn into the court and swiftly run past where we were hiding.

"There's another entrance by the Rue Jeanne d'Arc," whispered Julot. "He thinks you may have gone right through and come out on the other side. When he sees you haven't, he'll come back and search the court. Now follow me. Watch your feet."

Dashing a flashlight, he led the way up some steps treacherous with age and neglect. Turning a corner, I choked and held my breath. In the embrasure of the staircase were two doorless latrines. At the first landing we came to a long passage running in either direction. Julot turned to the left, flashing his light on walls enamelled with grease and grime. Several times I tripped because of missing boards in the

flooring. We passed doors on both sides like cell-doors. At one of these he stopped and softly fitted a key.

"Go inside. Don't make any noise."

He locked the door after us. We seemed to be in a tiny room, faintly lit through a window. By the reflected glow of the sky Julot went forward cautiously.

"Come, look."

By craning sideways I had a view of the entrance of the court. A tall shadow stood there.

"He's come back fast enough," said Julot. "From where he stands he can command the other entrance. He will probably wait till he sees some sign of you, for he is sure you are somewhere in the Cité."

"The Cité?"

"The Cité Jeanne d'Arc. It consists of two immense buildings that belong to the city of Paris. The entrances give on this court, and they house nearly two thousand people, who pay a weekly rent and who live from hand to mouth. It is considered to be the worst frequented property in the city. Only the poorest of the poor live here, and among them hundreds like myself who have no affection for the police. I think we can venture to have a light now."

Carefully pulling down the blind, he lit a small, shaded lamp.

"See," he said, pointing. "The wainscoting and the door-frames have been torn off to be used as firewood. They would even tear up the flooring if they could. There is no gas here, no running water, no sanitation. Yet never a room is vacant, and the city gets a big revenue out of it. Well, I mustn't complain. It's a good hole to hide up in, and it suits my simple needs."

As I looked round I saw that the only furniture in the place was a table, a chair and a roll of bedding, Julot squatted on the bedding and proceeded to make a cigarette.

"Take a seat, Harlequin. And now, what's the fuss about? Who's following you?"

"All I know is that he's called Teu Teu."

Julot stared at me. "*Tiens!* Teu Teu's out?"

"Very much out. Who is he?"

"A first-class crook with a sense of humour. He got sentenced about a year ago for criminal assault. It was a funny business, and it all came out in the papers."

"Tell me."

Julot lit his cigarette at the lamp, then squatted on the bedding.

"It seems Teu Teu had a mistress he adored. One day as they sat in a café she pointed out a fat bourgeois who passed with a pretty young wife.

" 'There,' said she, 'is the man who led me astray and deserted me.'

" 'The *salaud*!' said Teu Teu, and followed the fat bourgeois. He trailed him to a nice new apartment house, and found he lived in a little apartment on the top floor. That night when Teu Teu got home his girl told him the story and rather played on his feelings, She even shed tears; so that Teu Teu, who has a sentimental side, got up with an oath and went out.

"He went straight to the apartment of the little fat bourgeois, and rang the bell. It was after midnight, and the man came to the door in pyjamas.

" 'Hands up,' said Teu Teu, presenting a *rigolo* at his *boule*. Up went the *type's* mitts, and terror was printed on his map.

" 'March inside,' commanded Teu Teu. The bourgeois marched, and Teu Teu locked the door.

" 'Lead the way to your bedroom,' barked Teu Teu.

"Trembling, the man obeyed. His young, pretty wife was there in bed.

" 'If either of you make a cry,' said the bandit, 'I'll puncture your skins with a ball.'

"Then he made the wife get up and tie her husband to a chair. He saw that the man was bound so that he could not move.

" 'Now,' he said, 'I don't want your money, and I don't want your wife's jewels. This is a simple act of justice. Alphonse Poirot, have you forgotten Marie Poulard, with whom for three years you lived? She now lives with me, and she has told me all. So, Alphonse Poirot, you amused yourself with my mistress for three years. Well, you cannot complain if for three hours I amuse myself with your wife.' "

The remainder of the narrative was better suited to the pages of Rabelais than to those of Boccaccio. Under the eyes of her gagged husband, Teu Teu compelled the pretty young wife to comply with his exigencies. At first she obeyed with terror and loathing. But perhaps she resented the revelation

that Alphonse had had a mistress, and felt revengeful on her side; or it may have been that Teu Teu was a strapping lad, and, compared with her husband, physically a man; but after a little she submitted with a resignation not altogether that of the martyr. So much so that when Teu Teu had departed she and Alphonse had no end of a row.

"I hear she's getting a divorce," said Julot. "Naturally she has a grievance; but who knows? It may not be the most obvious one. In any case Teu Teu got his picture in the *Matin* along with the whole history of the affair. Of course he was arrested next day. Jean Dulac got him. He was given a year, but he laughed and said it was worth it. That's Teu Teu, a grim *farceur*. Now tell me why he is chasing you?"

I did not immediately reply. I was considering. Could I trust this man? He was so resourceful, so expert in the ways of the underworld. If only I could make an ally of him as I had done of Casque d'Or!

"Let me ask you a question first," I said. "Would you risk your life to save Paris from this plague that is devastating it?"

"I don't know that I would," shrugged Julot. "It's none of my affair."

"But think of humanity. Would you be willing to sacrifice yourself for the good of humanity?"

"I don't care two pins about humanity."

The same lamentable point of view that Casque d'Or had taken.

"But don't you believe in human brotherhood?"

"Nothing doing. I don't want any brothers. I live alone, work alone. I'm out for myself. Brothers be damned."

Julot was no internationalist. Perhaps a nationalist, then.

"What about France? What would you do for your country?"

"That's another affair. I'd bloody well die for my country. Didn't I fight through the war, and if another was declared wouldn't I be the first to join up?"

What narrow ideas these people had. I deplored this readiness to fight for one's country, right or wrong. However, it was my point of attack as far as Julot was concerned.

"What would you say if I told you that your country is in the gravest danger and you might help to save it?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that the pest that is devastating Paris will shortly spread throughout France. Her enemies are sowing this epidemic, and if they are not checked your country will be destroyed."

He was all attention now, but staring at me as if he thought I was a little mad.

"Go on. Tell me."

From the beginning I told him. He listened with profoundest attention, and he seemed strangely impressed.

"These are the facts," I said. "You can draw your own conclusions. Mine are – that it's a case of sticking at nothing. We've got to get possession of this serum. Perhaps Sinistra means to sell it to your Government. Perhaps to another Government hostile to yours. We can't risk that."

"Why is he so anxious to get hold of *you*?"

"I can't understand. Maybe he thinks I know too much."

"Then it would be the easiest way to have these men kill you as they have done the others. But he wants to take you alive."

"He took the others alive, and tortured them before having them killed. Evidently he designs for me the same interesting programme."

"We must not allow such an unpleasant thing to happen," said Julot, and gratefully I noted the "we." "It's a pity they have identified you, though. They mustn't see us together. And now they've lost you, you mustn't let them get on your track again. Let me think."

For a long while he squatted silently on his roll of blankets, his face as expressionless as a stone image. His only movement was from time to time to light a cigarette. His dark eyes brooded gloomily. I got tired of waiting, but an hour passed before he rose with a brusque movement.

"What do you mean to do?" I demanded.

"I'm going straight to them. I know of Gustave Lazare, and if, as I expect, he is mobilising the underworld to search for you, I am one of the first he would want. Then when I am enlisted on their side, perhaps I can get on the trail of Sinistra. I'll seek Lazare straight away."

"And what must I do?"

"Remain here. On no account go out till I come back. The court is sure to be watched. You can sleep and wait my return. I'll be back shortly after dawn."

2

As soon as he had gone I lay on the floor, and wrapping myself in the blankets, was soon asleep. When I awoke it was already daylight. After a bewildered moment I realised where I was. It was time Julot had returned. Rising, I stretched my cramped limbs and cautiously looked out of the window. No sign of anyone at the mouth of the court. Probably Julot was wrong, and Teu Teu had given up his watch.

As I peered forth, I saw the day waken to activity. Some men with a lorry emptied the cans of garbage; men and women came slinking back, and others issued forth with the air of beasts on the prowl. A swarm of half-naked children took possession of the court, playing noisily amid its squalor. My sleep had rested me, and I felt energetic again; but suddenly I realised I was hungry. Since my lunch of the day before I had not eaten. Would Julot never return?

From a near-by steeple I heard eight o'clock strike; then nine, then ten; and to the faintness of hunger was added a growing agitation of the nerves. The non-appearance of Julot seemed unaccountable.

Suddenly an idea came to me – suppose the man was false, meant to betray me? Had I not told him that Sinistra had offered a million francs for my capture? How could a man like that resist such a reward! I had been crazy to reveal so much. Uneasily I began to cast about for a means of escape.

Then as I continued to peep round a corner of the blind a cry burst from me. There at the entrance to the court was Julot, but with him was another man. With a sickening sense of betrayal I saw that the other was Teu Teu. The five foot Julot was looking up at the six foot Teu Teu, and they seemed on the best of terms. Even as I watched I saw this sinister couple cross the street and enter a café with a closed door.

What a fool I had been! Well, it was still greater folly to remain there. I must get away before the precious pair emerged. I was turning to the door when a rumbling in the court drew me back to the window. A huge covered wagon had entered and was stationed there. Three men jumped from it, and at the sight of them all the playing children shrank back.

For the men were clad from head to foot in coarse khaki, gloved and hooded. Besides wearing goggles, the lower part

of each face was muffled, so that nothing was distinguishable of their features. Each carried a roll of canvas.

I recognised them. They were the seekers of the dead, priests for the most part. And now I heard them coming along the corridor and entering a room only a few feet away. There were faces at the windows of the court, many eyes fixed on the entrance by which I had come. I must wait a little. Soon they reappeared, carrying a limp form tied in a canvas sheet. As they loaded it on the wagon all eyes were on them. Now was my chance.

Quickly I slipped out and was in the court. In another moment I had gained the entrance that gave on the Rue Jeanne d'Arc. No one regarded me, not even a spotty-faced youth in a grey sweater, who stood open-mouthed looking at the cremation wagon. At a swift pace I mounted to the Place d'Italie, and descended to the Gobelins.

3

There in a bar I had bread and coffee, supplemented by some cold sausage from a neighbouring pork butcher's. The food cheered me mightily, giving me fresh strength and courage. But now I was completely at a loss. I did not know the next move to make, and it was almost unconsciously I found myself directing my steps up the narrow and seething Rue Mouffetard. Before I realised it, I was quite close to the Place du Pantheon. A longing more strong than I could resist came over to me to revisit my studio. Straightening my cap and dusting my clothes I leapt up the stairs.

Thank God! Back again! How joyfully I turned the key in the inside, locking out the world! Alone, safe, sheltered once more! And everything was just as I had left it, so that for a moment it seemed as if I had never been away. The sight of my books gave me a pang. Sociology, political economy – dreary stuff; but at that moment, oh, how dear!

A glance in the mirror startled me. It was a stranger I saw. Decidedly I looked tough, every inch the apache. Under the shapeless cap my face was white and hollow, my mouth grim. I seemed to have aged too, and behind my bristle I gave the impression of one capable of violence. Well, I would remove all that.

So, getting a pail of water from the tap on the landing, I shaved and bathed, washing even my head. Then I put on some fresh linen and again regarded myself. The change was so great I laughed aloud. Clean and spruce, it was hard to believe I was the same man. But Lord! I was thin. The tennis trousers and sweater I had on were too large for me, and without its stubble my face looked gaunter and grimmer than ever.

Was that someone knocking at the door? It startled me, and somewhat nervously I answered. But it was only the concierge.

"Ah, monsieur is back again. I heard him moving about. And did monsieur have a good holiday?"

"Thanks, madame. The country is lovely at this moment."

"But yes. It is good to be where trees are green in such a time. Yesterday this letter came for monsieur."

Thanking her I took it. From Wistley no doubt. I opened it and was astonished to find it was from Uncle Cyrus. I read:

"DEAR HARLEY, – You will be surprised to hear from me; but I would like to see you on an important matter. It concerns Rosemary. I hear she has become neurasthenic, and wishes to enter a convent as a novice.

"I do not want to see her life ruined, and think that perhaps she had better be told the truth. At the same time I appreciate the way you have acted. I realise that it is because of your supposed desertion of her she has decided to take this step. I will be glad to discuss the matter with you, and will sacrifice all feeling of pride for her sake.

"If you will call on Friday I shall be pleased to see you.

"Your affectionate uncle,

"CYRUS QUIN."

I sat down on the bed, thinking confusedly. Something must be done about Rosemary. The poor girl was breaking her heart. How had she interpreted my silence? Perhaps she thought me dead. Well, better the truth, shocking though it was, than to let her go on torturing herself with doubt and fear. Heavens! What a snarl it all was!

Then my mind came back to the present. Somehow it seemed to be unreal, impossible. Were not all my fears fantastically distorted? Here in this studio with the portraits

of H. G. Wells and Woodrow Wilson staring at me from the wall, the events I had just gone through seemed like an evil dream.

But soon I realised that I had not slept in a bed for many nights, and the voluptuousness of it overcame me. Stretching blissfully I closed my eyes. I heard noon strike from the tower of St. Genevieve as I lost consciousness of time and place. But I had a dark dream in which a monster microbe with purple tentacles crawled over me, and I could not shake it off.

The same bell was striking six when I opened my eyes. With joy I realised I was back in the studio. I would never leave it now. To the devil with plots and pests. What had I to do with such? Yet – the people dying around me, whose lives I might save? No, I would go to the police and tell my story. Better still, I would tell it to Uncle Cyrus.

A load seemed to slip from my shoulders as I came to this decision. And now I was hungry again. I would treat myself to a good dinner, and on the morrow I would see my uncle.

Springing up I began to dress. Once more I felt full of hope. Almost gaily I descended the studio stairs. Then I stood staring. Someone was pushing an envelope under the door of the apartment. Going to it I threw it open, but saw no one. The envelope was without address. I tore it open and this was what I read:

"*You are known to us now.*

"*Be advised and give up what you possess, or you will share the fate of the others.*

"*Bring it to the Lapin Vengeur at ten o'clock to-night.*

"*Fail at your peril.*

SINISTRA."

The warning was typed, and twice I read it before I realised its import. Then returning to the studio I sat down on the bed. Dusk was falling, and shadows gathered about me. At last I rose and looked from the window. Under a newly lighted lamp just opposite, a man was leaning.

With a start I recognised the unwholesome youth in the grey sweater.

CHAPTER VI

THE CAVERN OF THE DEAD

1

HUNGER drove me forth again. It was after nine o'clock and the Place du Pantheon was gloomy and silent. Sombre and portentous towered the massive bulk of the Pantheon, but I could see no lurking form in the deeper shadow. So I crossed the Place hastily, and gained the Boul' Mich'.

In a brilliant bar I devoured a series of ham sandwiches, washing them down with gulps of strong coffee. Here in the crowds and careless gaiety, how absurd seemed my fears! Decidedly I was letting my nerves get the better of me. To-night, at least, there could be nothing to fear; and to-morrow I would lay the whole matter before Uncle Cyrus. He stood so well with the French Government that he would see I got a fair hearing.

So cheered, exhilarated even, I took a seat on the terrace of the Café Vachette. In my pocket was the typewritten paper signed *Sinistra*. What did the man want that I possessed? Something vital to his purpose. And I was supposed to have it. For that reason he was prepared to go to any length, even to promise me immunity. But probably he had made the same promise to the others. And where were they?

"If I did possess what he wants," I reflected, "and I surrendered it to him, what guarantee have I that he would spare me? Indeed, it is probably because he thinks I have it, that I am alive at this moment."

And at this moment ten o'clock sounded.

"There!" I declared in mock melodrama. "The hour I am supposed to meet his emissary at the Lapin Vengeur. And here I am at the Café Vachette. Too late now. By remaining here I have defied him. It is a struggle to the death."

Yet if it had not been for the thought of Uncle Cyrus I might have gone there, bluffed my way into the man's presence, perhaps shot him. No doubt I would have lost my

life in doing so, but I would probably have lost it in any case.

Such were my thoughts as I sat there, shivering a little, for the night was chill. I had better get back to my room. But the coffee I had taken had banished weariness, and I thought of that vast, frowning pile, the Pantheon, with a nervous chill. I would have to cross the deserted square so full of menacing shadows, then climb dark stairs to the loneliness of the studio. Suddenly I realised that I was *afraid* to return. Here in the glitter and movement I felt safe; but already lights were being extinguished, and the crowd thinning away. Soon this boulevard, too, would be dark and deserted, and then what would I do? At that moment a real thrill ran through me. My attention was all awake.

I had noticed the man passing several times, but without any sense of significance. A short stubby man he was, in a crimson sweater. All at once I remembered him. He was one of those who had attacked me in the Lapin Vengeur, the one I had wiped the floor with. So I was being followed everywhere, watched relentlessly. A sense of the hopelessness of escape came over me.

A big rat was emerging from the grating that surrounded a plane-tree. I watched it as it ran along the gutter, and disappeared down the entrance to a sewer. It reminded me of that human rat who had just passed, and was now halted at the corner of the Rue des Ecoles. A great rage possessed me. I would evade these devils yet.

Rising abruptly, I entered the café. Evidently they were closing; for the waiters were piling the chairs on the tables, and a charwoman waited with her pail. They all looked at me so sourly I backed out again. As I returned to the terrace I surprised the man in the crimson sweater. He was peering through the window; but on seeing me he turned sharply and made off up the street. At the corner in front of the Café d'Harcourt he paused again.

Otherwise for the moment the street was deserted. No, there was a bent old man shuffling from café to café. He had a stick with a pin on the end, with which he was picking up cigarette stubs and putting them into a sack. I watched him as he poked among the tables and added to his collection. He was one of the tribe of *megot* gatherers, most wretched of the *métiers* of misery.

Now he had finished and was shambling slowly on. In

front of the d'Harcourt I could still see the human rat. But my mind was made up. I would give him a run, and if it came to the worst—— I felt that grim rage rise in me. Quietly I slipped into the shadow of the houses and sped swiftly down the street. I got a good start before he saw me; then quick as a flash he dashed in pursuit.

I was about a hundred yards ahead now, so increasing my pace I turned the corner of the Rue des Ecoles almost at sprinting speed. By instinct I continued to run down hill. I crossed the street and made for the Musée de Cluny, hoping to lose my pursuer in one of the narrow lanes behind it. But in that night silence the sound of my feet betrayed me. Never could I escape by running. Well, there was another way.

Sharply turning the corner just opposite the gate of Musée, I crouched and waited. The fellow should have been warned by the sudden silence, but the excitement of the chase carried him away. Precipitantly he dashed round the corner after me. I was waiting with my right arm drawn back, and as he swung round I shot it to his jaw with all my weight behind it. He seemed to describe a somersault before falling. Then he lay still enough.

I looked at him spead-eagled in the gutter. Perhaps I had killed him; but for the moment I did not care. I glanced all about me and not a soul did I see. Quietly I walked away.

2

At least I had got rid of that one. No doubt there were others, but for the moment I had destroyed my trail. If only I could baffle them through this night, the dawn would bring safety. However, they would soon be on my track again. I was a marked man now.

It would be folly, I thought, to return to the studio. In my excited state I magnified my danger, and each shadow seemed pregnant with menace. As I went swiftly on, keeping to the narrow streets, I found I was trembling violently; but more from excitement than from fear. I hurried in the direction of the Seine, and presently I found myself in the Place Maubert.

The "Place Maub" has an unsavoury reputation. It is

like the head of an octopus from which, antenna-like, little evil streets twist towards the river. Into this quarter of poverty and crime I now plunged. Yonder at the foot of the Rue Dante (fit name for such an inferno) was the Café des Clochards. It was gorged with putrid humanity, spewing them out on the sidewalk. Mingled with its misery were men decently dressed – thieves and receivers. It would be a good idea, I thought, to identify myself with these well-to-do crooks; but from the doorway I saw that the place was packed with human compost. Every seat was occupied, and over every table drooped weary heads. At one I counted five of them. On the small table the heads lay touching, blond and hoary, young and old; but all alike in the giant lice that prowled the jungles of their hair.

Around the chairs and tables with their burden of unconscious misery surged the sleepless misery that could find no place. If only I could get a seat at one of those tables, I too could hide my face and defy recognition. I would take my chance on the vermin. But place there was none.

Across the street I saw the dim light of another café, even lower on the scale. I entered and going up to the bar, demanded a small glass of beer. The man who served it scarcely glanced at me. Here too there was no place vacant at the tables. In this eddy into which swirled the scum of the quarter, nearly everybody slept. Beside their tousled heads stood half-empty bottles of *pinard*, mumbled crusts and refuse of food gathered from the gutter. The air was acrid with the smell of sweat and filth.

I watched a party of five at a table near the door. They did not seem sleepy at all, indeed were slightly hilarious. A youth with a face all nose (chin and forehead retreating sharply as if afraid of that formidable proboscis) stood swaying and singing, glass in hand. His protruding eyes were ecstatic, and the song he sung was "Plaisir d'Amour." As he developed its theme the tears ran down his cheeks. Beside him, looking up at him adoringly was a girl of about sixteen, who seemed more than half idiot.

Opposite the youth, also glass in hand, was a little old man, silver-haired and so thin his mud-corroded clothes hung on him like a rack. His face had the glazed look of "proud" flesh, and his eyes seemed to swim in blood. The remaining two of the company were old also, a man and a woman.

Their blotched faces were close together, as they cuddled amorously.

The weeping youth sang with eyes fixed, putting more and more expression into his voice. With tongue half out the old man across the table leered at the singer, then suddenly began to laugh. Contemptuously he tried to push the youth back.

"Stop your crying, you fool," he jeered. "Give us something lively, some hot stuff. Here, I'll sing you one."

In a harsh croak he began a tuneless, scurvy ditty in which the word "*vache*" figured largely. But the youth would have none of it.

"I'll cry all I want to," he protested brokenly. "He who does not know how to cry does not possess a heart."

This sentiment he repeated several times, while the satyr persisted in reiterating the charms of his "*vache*." Then the two began to wrangle. The idiot girl caught the grimy hand of the youth and began to fondle it. The crapulous couple of greyheads, enveloped in each other's arms, were pressing their bloated faces together, and kissing with the gusto of fresh young lovers. Suddenly the old man paused in his singing and delivered a stinging slap to the young man.

There was a moment of consternation. Heads were raised angrily, fuddled eyes stared stupidly. But it was the barman who was roused to action. As all eyes turned to him, I realised that a blow in this place of sodden derelicts was an outrage against its code. Expectantly all looked at the bartender, while the man who struck the blow now seemed stunned with the enormity of his action.

As the bartender rose I saw that he was an enormous man, fair, fat, young, but with the frame of a Hercules. Calm, resolute, he came from behind the bar, with the air of one who is going to chastise a naughty child. The old man had gone down on his knees and was begging for mercy, but the barman was like a retributive god. He struck the kneeling *clochard* again and again on either side of his face, then gathering him up he carried him at arm's length to the door. There he dropped his burden and kicked it several times.

"Go away," he said in a gentle voice. "Don't come back for one week. Naughty one! You are banished."

As he returned there was satisfaction on the faces of the *clochards*. Honour had been satisfied, justice meted out. But

the man who had been kicked stood sadly peering into the window of his lost paradise.

3

Seeing no chance of sitting down, I left the place and wandered on. I was now in the Rue de l'Hotel Colbert, a dark by-street in the shadow of a historic mansion. About midway the dim light of a curtained café attracted me. There was something discreet and retiring about it, so I opened the door and entered. But at the sight of its interior I halted with dismay.

For this café was much smaller than the others – a mere cellar, and pervaded by a cellar-like gloom. To the left of the door was a circular bar, within which a fat man was penned. Between his zinc-lined counter and his battery of bottles he dozed contentedly, his large stomach rising and falling under a white apron. To the right of the door was a small square space, packed tight with tables at which a score of men were sitting. They all slept, and looked like so many bundles of shapeless rags. Some were hunched forward on their chairs, some had their heads tilted back. Some were twisted sideways, their cheeks resting on the chair backs. One man had fastened a newspaper under his cap to shade his eyes. They were all in contorted positions, but with the indifference of habit they slept. The light from the solitary lamp was low and dim, and there was no sound save a grating snore from a youth who leaned his head against the wall.

But it was something else that made me stare. For beyond the bar was a long corridor. It was narrow, a mere passage; yet down it ran a table. On each side of the table were benches, and sitting closely, packed tight between the table and the wall, were a good threescore of the usual types of human debris. What impressed me so was that the long double line of heads lay so flat, so deathly still.

Twin rows of heads, all alike in dishevelment and dirt, nailed to the board by woe and weariness. You could have swept a sword a foot above the table and harmed no one. They slumped forward like dead people. They even gave the illusion they were praying.

One could only wonder what hideous human masks lay

under these tousled heads. Occasionally a man would raise himself and wriggle within his clothes, then sink again to profound slumber. Or a woman would reach under the table, and claw frantically at her skirt. But in the gloom all one could see of their faces was a livid smudge.

I asked for a *bock* and sipped it gingerly. The thought that some of these bits of ordure might have touched the glass daunted me. I was wondering what I should do next, when a man entered. To my surprise I saw it was the gatherer of cigarette stubs.

He ordered a glass of white wine. Seen through a tangle of greyish hair his eyes were dark and wild. He muttered to himself, then suddenly putting his hand inside his shirt he began to scratch. I could hear the rasping of his nails on his hide.

"Your family are lively to-night, *mon vieux*," said the *patron*.

The old man scowled at him. "Yes, I nourish them well. I am not like your pigs of capitalists who live on the sweat and dirt of labour. They are the real parasites."

He continued to scratch. "Ah, yes, I look after my *pensionnaires*. They are happy, I think. Why not? They are warm and well fed. They know neither fear nor pain. How many of those that labour can say as much? And I do not kill my little friends. I do not believe in taking life. Are they not God's creatures, perhaps as wonderful in their structure as any of us? Who am I that I should destroy them? Are we not little else than lice crawling on the body of the world?"

"You're quite a philosopher, old fellow."

"One has to be or one would go mad. Here in the Cavern of the Dead only wine and a little wisdom keeps me from jumping into the Seine."

The Cavern of the Dead! As I looked around I thought that the old man had named it well. Then the *patron* turned to me.

"Do you want a seat, my lad?"

I nodded. He went to the top of that long row and gave a grey-haired woman a dig on the shoulder.

"Shove along, Mother. There's room for a small one."

She raised a timid, bestial face. "*Merde!*" she snarled, but she gave way a little. Then her head dropped again. I sat on the end of the bench and leaned my elbows on the table. The old man was savouring his wine, the landlord was dozing. In

that thick nauseous air I felt drowsy. The silence and gloom seemed to weigh on me like oil, and my head sank.

But I did not sleep. I felt as if an army of vermin were marching over me. I tried to convince myself it was imagination. I thought I would go out into the clean night, but I dreaded what the night might hold. Here at least I was safe.

Something was touching my hand. Looking up I saw that the old cigarette gatherer had found a place opposite me. The grey mop under its greasy felt hat was resting on the table before me. But he seemed asleep, so I dropped my head once more.

I was not wrong this time. The hand of the old man was reaching out to mine. Very softly I felt a folded paper being thrust between my fingers. They closed on it.

Half turning, so that my body concealed my hand from the street window, I unrolled the paper. There was some writing in pencil, and with difficulty I read:

"*See Colombe without fail before morning.*"

CHAPTER VII

THE WOMAN WHO LIVED IN A SEWER-PIPE

1

Colombe, the woman who lived in the *terrain vague,* close to the Place d'Italie, was by no means dovelike by nature. Indeed the fact that she had tenanted the same drainpipe for ten years testified to a certain belligerent tenacity. It was really a super-drainpipe, and must have been an end section, for it had only one outlet. Two other sections formed an angle in front, hiding the entrance to it, while across its mouth hung a screen of sacking.

Why these vast sewer pipes lay there no one seemed to know. Probably all record of them had been lost in the archives of the Department of Public Works; and so, rent free in her tunnel of iron, Colombe lived from year to year.

Her worst foes were wanton small boys, apaches in embryo. The police had come to look on her as an institution, and as far as the criminal world was concerned, her very misery was her sanctuary. Some Sisters, whose convent backed on the waste land, gave her stale bread and cast-off clothes, while in the open market on the boulevard there was always choice refuse to be garnered. Food, clothing, shelter – what more could one ask of an unfeeling world?

She was supposed to be half-witted. For this reason some said she was one of the happiest of women. For none are so happy as a certain type of the insane, and old Colombe was of this type. She went about dreaming dreams and seeing visions. As she walked the streets she talked to herself, smiling joyfully, and sometimes pausing to laugh aloud. Many a sane one envied her in her trances. Yet when molested she could become a shrieking virago.

2

Slipping out of the Cavern of the Dead I found my way by the better-lighted boulevards to the Place d'Italie. I

kept in the middle of the street, taking comfort in the revolver that Casque d'Or had given me. If I was menaced, I made up my mind to use it. I would fire low and cripple my opponents. I looked around to see if I was being followed; but the only sign of life I encountered was an occasional couple of policemen. So with a deal of caution I arrived at the waste land where dwelt the Dove.

It was masked by a high boarding, covered with advertisements. However, I found a breach in the boards and passed through. Here, where the light of the street did not penetrate, it was as dark as a tomb, and for a while I could make out nothing. Then over to the right a faint glow drew my attention.

Squatted in her sewer pipe Colombe was reading a child's first primer. She peered closely at the thumbed pages, spelling aloud, and often stopping with a chuckling laugh. Then she raised her head, for her quick ear detected someone moving about in her domain. Promptly she put out her candle. She also reached for the can of abominably filthy water she used to repel invaders.

"Go away," she cried waspishly. "Leave me alone. I stay here by order of the Government."

"Is that Colombe?"

"Yes, who are you?"

"A friend of Casque d'Or."

A silence. Halted on the other side of the drainpipe I saw again the ghostly light filter through the screen of sacking.

"All right, friend of Casque d'Or."

I advanced. By stretching some boards along the drainpipe Colombe had made an apology for a bed. It was covered with straw and rags and on it she now sat. The hollow spaces about her feet were littered with old junk. On a box, wedged between three nails, was the end of a wax candle the Sisters had given her. Her book lay on her lap, her glazed, purple-veined hands holding it open at the place.

"Casque d'Or told me she would leave a message for me," said I.

"And who may you be?"

"Harlequin."

She turned over a few pages of the tattered book. There on the margin I could see some words faintly written in pencil. Bending down I read:

"*Meeting to-morrow night, nine o'clock, Auberge des Assassins.*"

I was peering closer to make sure, when I saw the book slip from her hands. Her eyes were staring wildly over my shoulder. The next thing I heard was a hoarse whisper in my ear:

"Keep still or you're a stiff."

At the same moment I felt pushing into the back of my neck a ring of steel. I decided to keep still.

"Put your hands behind you."

That ring of metal jamming into the nape of my neck was persuasion enough. I obeyed.

"Quick with the cord. Lash his wrists tight."

Someone else moved in the darkness. I felt my crossed wrists being bound together; at the same moment I saw the foot of Colombe push the book under her bed.

"You can rise and turn round now," went on the voice.

I did so. In that faint candlelight two men confronted me. I recognised Lazare and Teu Teu.

"Trapped you at last!" sneered Lazare. "You've given us a pretty chase. That was a nice one you handed the Sailor. You hit hard, young fellow."

I was a little taller than he, and he measured me appreciatively.

"So you're the wily one that has baffled us all. Humph! You look simple enough. It was foolish of you to think you could outwit us. Three of us have been watching you ever since you left the Cité Jeanne d'Arc. Still, when you bowled over the Sailor you nearly beat us. If Teu Teu hadn't recognised you sleeping among the *clochards*, we'd have been a pretty pair of fools. Well, I know one man who will be pleased with this night's work. Here, Teu Teu, you'd better gag him."

With a very filthy muffler unrolled from his throat Teu Teu did so. I nearly suffocated. So he had been following me all the time. What a simpleton I had been! Perhaps the whole thing was a trap. Perhaps Colombe was in with them. But the next moment convinced me of her honesty, for Lazare turned on her ferociously.

"I'd almost forgotten you," he snarled. "Why did he come to see you?"

She stared in terror.

"Speak, will you? Teu Teu, make her speak."

Teu Teu gripped her frail body. What particular form of ju-jitsu he used I could not see, but a scream of pain burst from her.

"That won't do," rasped Lazare. "She'll rouse the world. *Sacré nom d'un chien!* Close your mouth, *sale vache*!"

But Colombe continued to scream hysterically: "*Au secours! Au secours!*"

So Lazare pulled from his coat a heavy bit of rubber tubing, and whacked her on the head with it. She tumbled over like a sack and lay still.

"That'll fix you for a while, old hag!" He blew out the candle. "Come with our friend, my brave Teu Teu. I'll lead the way."

Between them they forced me to march through the darkness. Lazare went first, picking the road by the light of an electric torch. The vacant ground was full of old scrap-iron, and worn-out bits of machinery. By the side of a rusty and battered boiler Lazare paused.

"We won't take him any farther for the present," he said. "You'd better tie his ankles, too."

In the darkness I felt that fine cord being relentlessly wound round them. When it was done Lazare gave me a push that sent me to the ground. There I lay helpless.

"Now," went on Lazare, "I'll stay and watch this bird. You get a taxi and hurry to the Lapin Vengeur. There you'll find Crevetto with my car. Tell him to take it and come on here as quickly as possible. Make haste. You should be back in half an hour."

Half an hour! With that whipcord cutting into my flesh! What agony! I would have begged Lazare to ease it a little, but the greasy rag round my mouth only allowed me to make inarticulate noises, at which my captor laughed. He leaned back on the scrapped boiler, his elbows resting on its edge, his eyes staring watchfully forward. Then he became very quiet.

I lay on my side, my head outstretched so as to breathe better. My hands were numb, but there were shooting pains all up my arms. I wondered if Lazare had killed Colombe. Little he cared. If they had taken the trouble to torture her, no doubt she would have told them of the message, and their

vengeance would have overtaken Casque d'Or. It was hard on Colombe, but his precipitation had averted a danger.

How interminably the minutes seemed to pass! To me each was like ten. I strained my ears to catch sounds from the boulevard, but all I heard was the laughter of some passing noctambules. A little uneasy wind visited the tall hoarding, making it creak querulously. There was a faint rustling amid the rank grass. A rat, no doubt. The sky was black as a dome of ebony, and from it came the sudden patter of rain. Again I heard that cautious rustling.

Lazare heard it, too, for he stirred and looked around. But at the same moment I twisted on the ground, moaning faintly. With a sniff of contempt the watcher relapsed into his semi-doze.

I was staring into the darkness, eyes as well as ears strained to the utmost. For I was watching a black smudge a short distance away. It was shapeless, one of those derelict boilers, no doubt. Only – as I looked I was sure I saw it move ever so slightly. I feared that Lazare might become aware of it; but so imperceptible was its movement he did not stir. Then as I stared, hardly believing my eyes, I saw that squat shape suddenly arise and take the form of a man.

What passed the next few moments was out of the range of my vision. I seemed to hear a swift rush, a cry from Lazare that ended in a grunt, and a thud on the ground. Then I was aware of someone bending over me, a voice in my ears.

"Steady there. In a second you'll be free."

As a knife sawed at the cord, my hands jerked apart. At my ankles, too, I felt a sudden freedom. I struggled to my feet. But as I tried to take the gag from my mouth, my numbed fingers refused to act. It was my rescuer who quickly unfastened the muffler.

"Come on," whispered the voice. "They may be back with the car at any moment."

I felt myself being piloted through the darkness, and wondered who my mysterious preserver might be. In a daze I followed blindly, stumbling and clutching at the black shadow that led the way. We passed through the gap in the hoarding and gained the boulevard; then to my amazement I saw that my conductor was the little grey gatherer of cigarette ends.

From a tangle of hair and beard dark eyes were peering at me ironically. "You don't recognise me?"

"Yes, you gave me the note."

"Is that all?" he said with a laugh. Then with a brusque gesture he swept off his hat and with it came his tangle of grey hair. At the same moment he pulled away that matted mass of beard. I uttered a cry. I was gazing at a pallid face, on either side of which a dark moustache darted up insolently.

"A disguise of mine," said Julot. "A good wig, some crêpe hair well attached with spirit gum, some old clothes – *voilà!* Behold me a respectable *clochard*. After dark, at least, no one could tell me from a hundred of my like. At times it has served me well, but never more so than to-night."

"I can't understand. I thought you had deserted me."

"Betrayed you, you mean. Don't worry. A proof – there lies Lazare with a bloody hole in his head a month won't cure. Ha! I hit him a pretty wallop, the pig!"

Then I remembered: "That poor old woman! He struck her down. I hope she isn't badly hurt."

"Wait there a moment. I'll go and see."

He was back very quickly. "She's all right. But let us get away from here. There's not a minute to lose."

Even as he spoke he dragged me into the shadow and the headlights of a big car swooped down on us.

"The whole gang. Armed to the teeth, no doubt. Let's beat it while the going's good."

He started off at a run, and I followed. We plunged into a quarter of warehouses and factories, darting down dark and narrow streets, swinging round unexpected corners. At last he stopped before what seemed to be an abandoned house. Producing a skeleton key he unlocked the door, and we entered a room strewn with fallen plaster and debris of all kinds. He locked the door again, and led the way up some ruinous stairs to a room above. It was clean, and commanded a view of the street.

"Here I think we're safe," said he. "In my character of *clochard* I often use this place. Well, this has been a busy night. Thank God, at last I can smoke."

He squatted on the floor, his back against the wall. By the reflected light of the window I could just make out a dark shadow, punctuated by a glowing cigarette point. I lay down.

"*Hein!* You thought I'd sold you, didn't you?"

"I'm afraid I lost my head," I admitted. "I saw you with Teu Teu and you seemed pretty thick."

"Teu Teu's a wily one, but I think I fooled him. Well, I'll tell you what I did when I left you. First I hailed Teu Teu and passed him the time of day. He asked me if I'd seen a cove of your description. I said no, but he could count on me to tip him off if I did. Then I made a delicate offer to help him, but he told me he already had Coco watching the other outlet of the court. When I asked him who he was working for, he admitted that it was '*le grand Gustave*.' That was all I could get out of him. Evidently he thought his fish was netted and did not want to let me in on a sure thing.

"Then I went to the Zone and had breakfast with your friend Casque d'Or. A girl in a thousand, that. I admire her. She was so anxious about you I told her all that had happened to you. She was glad to learn I was on your side, and that we three were working together. She couldn't inform me much about the movements of Lazare and his band, but she thought they had a meeting with Sinistra very soon. However, she could not tell me where or when. She said she'd try to learn more in the course of the day and would leave a message with old Colombe. They were very watchful, she said. Thus far they didn't suspect her but she had to be so careful."

Pausing to light a fresh cigarette, he resumed:

"When I left her I went straight to the Lapin Vengeur where Big Gustave has his headquarters. Crevetto rents an atelier that gives on the court of the café. It was there, I expect, the old professor met his fate. I found the whole band assembled, and very busy enrolling likely fellows for the man-hunt. Biftik approached me and offered to let me in on the job; but I told him it wasn't in my line, me being a respectable bandit and not a trailer. However, the price he offered was so tempting I allowed myself to be persuaded.

"Then I met Lazare who seemed to take a fancy to me. As I am of the Gobelins, I didn't know much of that Belleville gang; but we found many mutual acquaintances and drank a cognac together. His last words were: 'Remember, *mon gars*, it is to catch and not to kill. And good luck to you.' "

At the recollection Julot laughed in his dry way. He went on:

"Having squared myself with the enemy I returned to my humble roof-tree to find you gone. That was idiotic of you,

Harlequin, for the court was guarded so carefully. Teu Teu takes no chances. Even when I beguiled him away for a drink he left a good man in his place. Of course Coco spotted you, warned the others, and trailed you to the Pantheon. Since then three of them have been watching your every movement. While you rested up there, they were finding out all about you, and laying their plans for your capture. They even intended to break into your room and take you by force. Lastly, they got in touch with their employer.

"Then for some strange reason Sinistra changed his plans. He thought you might be induced to surrender once you knew the game was up. So he had a note slipped under your door inviting you to a meeting that night. It was the Sailor who delivered it. Did you get it?"

"Yes. But how do you know all this?"

"I was one of the watchers. Lazare and the Sailor were with me. Lazare told me a little and I guessed the rest. Then Teu Teu relieved me, but Big Gus remained. On the Boulevard St. Michel all three were watching you. When you made that breakaway and bowled over the Sailor you almost had them fooled. Teu Teu and Lazare were following at a distance. They found the Sailor knocked out, but no trace of you. It was by the sheerest luck Teu Teu got on to your trail again. He happened to look through the window of the Cavern and saw you there."

"But what were you doing?"

"Trailing the trailers. Got up as that old *clochard* it was easy. When I came on Teu Teu watching you through the window I felt I had to let you know somehow. Even Teu Teu couldn't see me passing that note. But I did not think you would rush off like that. If you had waited till the dawn you could have visited Colombe in safety. Well, you were up and away, and I could only follow and do my best. You know the rest. Now you're sure I am your friend."

"I'm ashamed I ever doubted you. But tell me, what must I do now?"

"What do you think you should do?"

"I thought I'd see my uncle in the morning. He's a bit of a big gun, and will be able to help me. I intend to tell him everything."

"Don't!" said Julot sharply. "Don't tell another soul. Remember that a single false move will scare them and spoil

everything. There are you and I and Casque d'Or. If we cannot handle this business between us no one can. For some reason Sinistra is holding his hand. No doubt he possesses the old professor's secret, but he is loath to part with it. Perhaps he's trying to make the best bargain he can, playing off one Government against another. Well, what we must do is to get hold of him before he can do the real mischief – that is, before he disposes of the serum. What did Casque d'Or say in her message?"

"They have a meeting to-night at the Auberge des Assassins. Where is the establishment with the sanguinary name?"

"On the outer boulevard of La Villette, near the abattoirs. You must go there. But be sure no one sees you during the day. Don't go near the Pantheon."

"What will you do?"

"Keep in touch with the enemy. Well, let's get some sleep now. We've work before us to-morrow."

CHAPTER VIII

THE WARNING

A SHAVE, a shine, a brush-up, transformed me from a respectable apache to a semi-respectable Bohemian. The purchase of a clean collar and a flowing tie made all the difference between Mouffetard and Montparnasse. Even the impeccable Weast, who opened the door of the Villa Cæsar, did not wince at the sight of me.

"Master's in bed, Mister Harley," he said. "But he told me to show you up whenever you arrived."

"Uncle's not sick, is he?"

"Oh, no, sir," said Weast cheerfully. "He's picking up nicely. Went for a drive in the car yesterday. But to-day he decided to go easy."

I found Uncle Cyrus propped up in a big four-poster. A canopy cast his face into shadow, but it seemed very white. His dark glasses looked black against the ivory of his skin, and his severe mouth drooped mournfully. A fine face, with strong features chastened by sorrow. Although I got a mournful impression, my respect was touched with admiration.

"Well, Nephew, you got my note?"

"Yes, Uncle – yesterday. I've been away."

"Away! Where can one go at such a time?"

"I've been staying with a friend. In the country," I added evasively.

"For one that's been staying in the country you look mighty pale. But who wouldn't these days. Two of my neighbours died yesterday. Even their wealth couldn't save them. If something's not done soon, God help us all."

"You're doing all you can, Uncle."

"I'm doing my best. I have established a laboratory. Got a dozen bacteriologists working night and day to discover some immunising agent. The Government seems to have lost its head. They think they can stamp it out by sanitary precautions."

"It's fine of you, sir. I'm sorry your health makes it so difficult."

"Yes, I'm losing heart. Nothing to live for. I've had a life of effort, and I've amassed a fortune. But what does it mean to me? Figures on a balance-sheet. I can only spend an insignificant part of it, and I cannot take it away with me when I die. It's no more really mine than a sum in trust. This house over my head isn't mine, though I've bought and paid for it. All those fine pictures and statues aren't mine, though I gave my cheque for them. I'm no more than the caretaker. There's no such thing as possession. We're fools, all of us, in our pursuit of gain. Children playing a silly game. Stay poor, young man. Be a thinker, a philosopher. Help mankind to understand life, and turn their eyes from false gods."

"If you do not consider you own your wealth, Uncle, at least you have the disposing of it."

"Aye, I can make restitution. The poor, the sick, the old – they'll get it all. I'm leaving you nothing, my lad. Or just enough to keep a tight roof over your head."

"You're too good, Uncle. I didn't expect even that."

"I've done the same for Rosemary. She'll never want. I'm sorry now I treated her so cruelly, but I couldn't help it. That's what I wanted to see you about – about Rosemary. She'd better be told. You haven't said anything?"

"No, Uncle, I promised you I wouldn't. She wrote to me, but I never answered her letters. I don't know what she thinks – perhaps that I've gone off with someone else and forgotten her. Better that way, as long as I can't tell her the truth."

"But she seems to be breaking her heart. Going to take the veil. Good God! We mustn't let her do that. I want you to tell her."

"I'll be so glad. It tortures me to feel she thinks bitterly of me. I'll write at once. Will you give me the address?"

"Miss Dale will give it to you."

"Thanks, Uncle. And now I won't fatigue you. Take good care of yourself."

"Oh, I'm all right. With the help of Weast and a crutch I'm able to hobble round. But talking about taking care of myself, look at that note I received a few days ago."

Carelessly he pointed to a folded paper that lay on the

dressing-table. In a queer, crabbed hand something was written.

"Read it," said my uncle with a sniff of scorn. As I did so my eyes grew wide. Almost doubting them I took it to the light.

"Read it aloud," said Uncle impatiently.

In a voice I tried hard to keep steady, I read:

"To Cyrus Quin, Millionaire American, WARNING!

"You are advised that if you do not cease your efforts to discover an immunising serum for the present epidemic your life will be forfeit. You are further counselled to return to your own country before evil befalls you.

"SINISTRA."

"Melodramatic, isn't it!" scoffed Uncle Cyrus. "Written by a fool or a madman. Blackmail. Well, I may be a sick man, but I'm too old to be intimidated by that sort of thing. What do you make of it?"

I was staring at the sharp, crabbed letters. For a long moment I stood there, a storm of wild thoughts whirling through my head. What game was Sinistra playing? Evidently he was determined to take no chances; but how absurd to intimidate all research! I felt there was something behind all this. I had an impulse to tell my uncle the whole story, but already he was beginning to look tired. Another time perhaps. Then there was my promise to Julot to tell no one.

"What have you done about this?" I asked.

"Treated it with the contempt it deserves. Doubled the staff down at the laboratory, and am carrying on more strenuously than ever."

"But is there any sense in what he writes? Are you hoping to discover a vaccine?"

"We're on the very verge of it. In a few days, if certain experiments turn out right, we'll be able to make a glorious announcement."

"Are you supporting this laboratory yourself?"

"Absolutely. The Government gives me no aid. Indeed, they rather scoff at my efforts. The group of bacteriologists working for the Government are jealous of us. But we're on the right track."

"Then if you were to withdraw your financial aid the whole thing would fall through?"

"I guess so. It's costing me ten thousand francs a day. If the money wasn't coming up, I reckon the staff would have to quit."

"If you were to die or disappear the enterprise would be suspended?"

"Knocked on the head."

"Well, Uncle, you must take the greatest care of yourself. I'm inclined to regard this note very seriously. Evidently someone wants to thwart your efforts to find a preventive for the pest."

"But that would be monstrous."

"International enmity is monstrous. Poison gas and death rays are monstrous. The dissemination of epidemics is in the same class. Secret hates are alive to-day, secret forces scheming revenge. If you take my advice, Uncle, don't venture out. Or if you must, get a couple of detectives to guard you."

"But surely in the public thoroughfare I am safe?"

"No one is safe these times. Everything is topsy-turvy. People are losing their heads. All they think of is the Pest."

"Well, I have a duty to do. No filthy threats can turn me from that."

In spite of his resolution I thought my uncle looked worn and weary. A good, perhaps a great man. One who, like Rhodes and Carnegie, would leave humanity in his debt. I was more than proud of him, yet as I descended the stairs my heart was heavy with anxiety.

As I entered Miss Dale's room she was sitting by her typewriter. I was shocked at her appearance. There were dark circles under her eyes and her cheeks were hollow.

"You're not looking at all well, Mona."

She laughed rather bitterly. "Neither are you, Harley. You're looking damned seedy. But who isn't, these days?"

"Working too hard?"

"No, work's good. Keeps one from going mad."

I stared at her. There was a passion of misery in her voice. She seemed all nerves, twitching, keyed up.

"You're not worrying about Uncle, are you?"

She averted her eyes and did not answer.

"Surely it isn't about that note he received? I know you

must be fond of him, being with him all these years; but you mustn't let a vague warning act on your nerves. All big men get similar threatenings."

She fixed her eyes on the typewriter: "I know. He's had 'em. Lots. But this is different. There's a power of evil loose in the world; a dark personality – pulling the strings, so that even princes and presidents dance to his tune. No, Harley, this is no idle warning."

Then she went on in a lighter tone. "But perhaps you're right. I am a bit neurasthenic. Ah! you remember that night at the Folies-Bergère, and the good time you gave me. No more jazz – only the jazz *macabre*."

"Come, now. We'll get over all this. The good times will return. By the way, I want the address of Rosemary, if you have it handy."

She went to a classification cabinet and searched some files.

"Her aunt, Madame Mercier, wrote from Aix about two weeks ago. But she was very ill. Heaven knows where she may be now. However, here's the Aix address."

Running a sheet into the typewriter she rapped out the name of the hotel and handed it to me. As I put the paper into my pocket I felt another one. Wondering what it was I took it out. Ah! I had forgotten. It was the summons I had received from Sinistra. Well, there was no reason this girl should see it. She was scared enough already. I was hastily returning it to my pocket when with a cry she snatched it from my fingers.

"What's that? Oh, excuse me, I didn't know what I was doing."

But the paper had come unfolded and her eyes were riveted on the message. Too much taken by surprise to protest I could only stare at her. Then I saw the paper flutter to the floor. Hastily I picked it up and restored it to my pocket. Perhaps after all she hadn't had time to read it.

But as I looked at her again I uttered a cry of alarm. Her head had fallen forward, her eyes were closed.

"Heavens!" I gasped. "The girl's fainted."

CHAPTER IX

THE AUBERGE OF THE ASSASSINS

1

SEATED in a big café on the Champs Elysées I tried to review the situation.

At my cry for help Weast had come running, and between us we carried the unconscious girl to her room. Then a housekeeper and a maid arrived on the scene, and in the confusion I escaped. Now I was wondering if Mona's strange fainting-spell had anything to do with my typewritten warning. Or was it the result of her general rundownness? Probably the latter. Anyhow, with more important things to worry me I let that matter drop.

First of all there was Rosemary. I had better write at once. It was curious how I felt towards her, as if my faculties were numbed where she was concerned. I realised that only time could adjust a position of such devastating irony. For the moment the swift rush of events had driven her image into the background. In the grimmer realities that confronted me she had become strangely visionary; but once I was free from the tangle in which I found myself, I knew she would haunt me more woefully than ever. And now I must write that letter to her.

But it was hard – hard to explain. I must begin at the beginning, and it would be a long job. Getting a paper and pencil I commenced a draft; however, my attention was being constantly distracted. From the table where I sat I could not only command the whole interior of the café, but also the two streets on whose angle it stood. As far as keeping a look-out was concerned I could not have had a better position. Yet I could see no one, near or far, who looked the least like one of Lazare's gang. In such a *chic* quarter shady characters would be terribly conspicuous. I felt reasonably confident that they had not traced me so far, and that here I was safe.

How quiet it all was! Most of the wealthy people who lived in this vicinity had managed to get away. Their windows were shuttered, their houses silent. Their fine autos were no longer to be seen. On the avenue an occasional taxi passed, and twice I saw those lugubrious lorries that were taking away the dead.

I turned over some newspapers on the table before me. There was no lack of sensational items. France was in a blacker plight than she had been since the days that preceded the victory of the Marne. The value of the franc had diminished to vanishing point. The middle class was practically ruined. The internal debts had been repudiated by a Communistic Government, and the public utilities were being rapidly nationalised. A strong party clamoured for the complete confiscation of private property.

But the Reds had made no diminution in the size of the army, and their eyes were turned apprehensively to their big neighbour. Germany was now a sleeping giant, still disarmed, but enormously refreshed and powerful. Thanks to the Dawes scheme she was well on her feet, though she had not paid more than a fraction of the awards. She too was Socialistic; but it did not prevent her people from working long hours for small wages. She was appallingly prosperous, dominating the markets of the world. The United States alone remained sturdily individualistic, and bloated with her wealth.

Glancing through the paper I saw that Parliament was moving to Bordeaux to escape the pestilence; that several deputies had fallen victim to it; that negotiations to form a Franco-German alliance had fallen through. People in France felt as if they were living on a volcano, and on top of it all was this hideous pestilence.

A newsboy passed calling the latest news of the plague. Passers-by looked subdued or frightened. A section of the city was giving itself up to the wildest debauch. Even in this café a number of girls and men were drinking recklessly. Yet as I watched them I realised the fear that lay behind their hectic gaiety. On the other hand it was almost uncanny to see how the work of the world was going on.

Unable to drive away the cloud of foreboding that lowered on me, I tore up the unfinished draft of my letter. It was no use trying to write now. I would do so later on, when my mind was in less of a turmoil.

So I sat there brooding, and the time passed. Soon it would be the hour of the meeting at La Villette. Better to go there by daylight, and look over the ground. Then I would decide if I could hide myself where I could be an eye-witness, or crawl somewhere near. I had supper in the restaurant, and about eight o'clock I started out.

2

Of all the bleak and bitter boulevards that which is called Macdonald is the most discouraging. On the one hand, black and repulsive like that of a prison, the wall of the slaughter-house; on the other the scabrous region of the Zone. For nearly a mile stretch the yards of the great abattoir, and from the inner side of that repellent wall come the shouts of drovers, the yelping of dogs, the moaning of frenzied and suffering cattle. About midway in the lonely stretch of boulevard is situated the Auberge des Assassins.

In the old days its clientele was largely composed of that desperate type of the apache known as the bandit, a fellow who was known to stick at nothing. Even now it was kept by an ex-prize-fighter who had done two terms in the Santé. By day, however, it was chiefly patronised by fleshers from the slaughterhouse. They drank deep, fought with knives over their women, but were honest enough. From the nearest gate of the abattoir they emerged between spells of slaughtering, their knives stuck in their leather belts. From head to foot their clothes were stiff and scaly with dried blood, their clogs brilliant as if covered with vermilion paint. They were usually big-bellied men with purple and violent faces.

At night the doors of the café were kept closed, and its clients were of a furtive and quiet character. Most were pale and watchful youths, whose veiled eyes masked their sneering insolence. They too, fought over the bobbed-haired girls with the raddled faces, and collected their earnings. They were so depraved, these youths, that they were beyond depravity. They were blasé to the point of austerity. They treated their women with deliberate cruelty and patronising contempt. Yet few of them were out of their teens.

While in the evening the ground floor of the café was occupied by these card-playing youths, there was a room

upstairs which was reserved for more private reunions, and of which the proprietor kept the key.

3

Before plunging into this sordid section of the city, I took off my collar and tie, cramming them into my pocket. Then as I reached the region of the "fortifs" I pulled my cap well over my face and adopted the slouching gait of the underworld. Soon I came to the canal of La Villette and, crossing it, turned into the bleak boulevard. The grass of the embankment was yellow and stale, the ground littered with refuse. I slipped along in the shadow, under a sky of sour greyness. The industrial region of St. Denis was all smoke and cinders, studded with black gas-tanks, and spiked with tall chimneys. Quite suddenly the night came down, blotting out the hideousness, and strewing it with lights that were like scintillating gems.

Opposite the Auberge des Assassins the demolition of the fortifications was in progress. On the ridge were piled neat stacks of stone ready to be carted away. I could crawl behind these, and be quite unobserved. Feeling reasonably safe I climbed up on one of the heaps and lay flat in the darkness. There, my chin resting on my folded arms, my eyes riveted on the lights of the auberge, I began my watch.

The café was like a crimson core in the midst of a vast and menacing blackness. My eyes could not pierce the red curtains that masked the windows, but from time to time the door swung open, and a yellow shaft of light was projected into the street. In this momentary illumination I could see dark figures come and go, but beyond making out that they were either men or women I could not identify them. I was sorry I could not creep nearer, but felt it would be too risky. From the café I could hear no sound at all, and as time went on a sense of its strangeness and mystery came to me.

I had not decided on any course of action. I had just a desperate feeling that I must do *something*. I still kept the revolver Casque d'Or had given me, and if necessary I meant to use it. But the darkness baffled me. I was thinking of crawling closer to that red smoulder when the yellow shaft shot across the road, and three men were silhouetted for a moment.

I was sure that it was Lazare and the other two. In my excitement I dropped from my perch and crept forward. Then I paused, for I saw a light appear in the room above the café. The *patron* was ushering the three upstairs. I was fairly close now, and through the lighted window I could see Lazare plainly. He had his head in white lint like a turban. Then the blind was drawn.

Well, they were up there, waiting for their mysterious employer. Convinced that for the moment the best thing I could do would be to lie low, I returned to my pile of stones.

Suddenly I head a sound coming from the desolate darkness of the boulevard. Then I beheld the dimmed lights of a car. I thought it was going to draw up in front of the auberge, but it came to a standstill about a hundred yards away. I saw a shadow pass in front of the headlights, slip along in the darkness of the wall, etch itself blackly against the opening door of the café. As it vanished inside, all I could make out was a very tall man in a black cloak.

No doubt it was Sinistra, and he had joined the others up there in the room. If only I could peer into the window, see for a moment the face of the mystery man, hear what he was saying! But that was impossible. A sense of the folly and futility of my enterprise came over me. Well, I would wait and confront him when he emerged. I was just in the mood to do something desperate. Taking out the revolver I saw that it worked smoothly.

Then the auto waiting by the side of the road drew my attention. Its lights looked like the eyes of a dragon in the gloom of a cavern. It had an abandoned air, as if nobody was guarding it. I crept along in the shadow of the bank till I was near enough to see plainly. No one was there, no chauffeur, no guardian.

Perhaps the car might give a clue to the identity of its owner. Still making sure I was not being watched I drew closer to it. But I heard approaching footsteps, so I boldly advanced and stood by it. The footsteps passed – two girls on the prowl. I was free now to examine the car.

It was of a make strange to me, a foreign one. Then I saw that it was a type of the famous Mercedes. A sporting model too. It could surely do over eighty an hour. But it was its form that interested me most. For the driver's seat was sunk

in the well of the torpedo-shaped body, and was closely hooded. Of the driver when inside nothing could be seen.

Another curious thing: the seat was set so far forward it seemed humped over the engine, and the greater part of the body was behind it. A hinged lid gave access to this. Raising it I looked inside.

"Lots of room to stow all kinds of baggage," I muttered. "Even to pack away a corpse."

I plunged my arm down the dark hole but it encountered nothing.

"Empty for the present anyway. I wonder if there are any marks to show who this boat belongs to."

Raising the flap of the hood I peered inside, but it was too dark to see the name-plate. The body was black everywhere except the registration number. I was trying to memorise this when I reflected that it was probably false. The owner had chained the wheels so that no one could run away with his car.

Then as I stood there a crazy idea came to me. If the coffer was capacious enough to hold a dead man, why not a living one? I lifted the lid and peered into the dark interior. I believed I could just fit in there. I stretched one leg over, hoisted myself up, slipped into a sitting position. Yes, with a little squeezing I could do it. With a start I saw the light-shaft from the auberge dart across the road and a man come out. I had no time to leap from the car, so I let myself slide down, and the traplike lid fell on me.

There I lay on my side, my legs doubled up, feeling more than a fool. But it was too late. Footsteps had drawn near. Now they had halted by the side of the car. I heard the chains being quickly detached and the same smooth voice I had listened to in the garage of Lazare.

"They would like to follow me, the rascals. Well, who would spy on me this night will have to drive fast and far."

Then I heard a cigarette being lighted, and the man climb into his seat. In another moment we were gliding swiftly away.

The car must have been furnished with excellent springs, for as long as we kept to the boulevard I scarcely felt the motion. But presently we drew up at what seemed to be one of the city gates, and from then on the way was rougher. Soon by the vibration I judged that we must be going over

pavé, and very bad *pavé* at that. I braced myself as well as I could, and tried to preserve my head by curving my arms round it. Still it was by no means agreeable, and I was thankful when we struck the smooth road again.

By the whizzing of the motor, which I could hear very plainly, we must have been going at a very great speed. By the swish of the rear wheels, which seemed very near, we were on a country road. Several times we swung round sharply, and occasionally, from the scream of the horn, I judged we were passing through villages. Then by the pant of the engine and the silence of the klaxon I guessed we must be on a long straight road. Here for the first time I ventured to look out.

As I raised the lid the wind was like a whiplash. It whistled piercingly in my ears. At first I could make out only a blur of darkness, but soon by the light of the stars I saw that we were in an open, plainlike country. Looking back the way we had come, I perceived a tiny yellow gleam in the far distance. Then I dropped the lid again and braced myself anew.

More twisting and horn blowing; then after an interval a panting burst of speed. Again I ventured to look out. We were in a forest now. Down a long vista I saw the outline of treetops scrolled against the stars. We must be on one of those league-long avenues that so often cut the forest. Nothing but trees and stars and that arrow-straight level of road. What was that light I saw far down it? It looked like the same I had seen previously. Could it be that we were being followed? If so; by what and by whom? But suddenly the light vanished, and I gave up trying to solve this problem, for I felt the car slowing down.

As with a sudden grip of the brakes it stopped dead, I crouched in my hiding-place again. None too soon. For my driver leaped out and was standing on the road. I heard the scratching of a match and judged he was smoking another cigarette. I was alone in the depths of the forest with this man who was now slowly walking round his car. He came to a stop at the rear, leaning back and smoking quietly. If only I could have wriggled round and raised the trap I could have had him from behind. But that was physically impossible, so I lay still. It was again with intense relief I heard him spring to the wheel again.

Once more we were on the way, going quicker than ever.

However, I did not look out any more. I resigned myself to wait until we had arrived at our destination. I was bruised and sore now, and painfully cramped. At last, after what I judged to be a good hour of speeding, again we came to a stop. I heard the driver descend, throw open a gate and drive the car in. Then he ran it under an open shed and leapt out. Peeping from my hiding-place I saw him make for what seemed a huge and ruinous house at the end of a weedy and neglected garden. There he unlocked a door and entered.

I crawled forth, terribly stiff and sore. The last part of the drive had been torture. But I was exultant, for at last I had trailed Sinistra to his lair.

CHAPTER X

THE MAN WITH THE MASK

YES, I had succeeded where Lazare had failed. I had run this fox to earth. For three hours he had held a wild course, defying pursuit. Little did he dream he was carrying a passenger whose middle name was Nemesis.

So thought I at least, as I gazed at the mass of masonry confronting me. Now I knew where the beast holed up, it would be strange if I failed to discover his identity. I had no plan of action. I was simply resolved that I would force him to give up the serum of the professor, even if it had to be at the pistol point. Aye, even if I had to kill him, I would prevent him doing further harm.

First of all, I must get into the house. Cautiously I reconnoitred, gradually drawing nearer. Soon I was close to the dark doorway where he had entered. It looked sufficiently unpromising, and was no doubt bolted from within. On the ground floor all the windows were barred and shuttered. No entrance there.

I turned my attention to the second story. It was a good height from the ground, and its windows, too, were shuttered. All but one. This had a little balcony in front and appeared to be unprotected. It was dark and curtained, but even as I looked I saw a gleam of light.

Swiftly I retreated to the darkness of the shed, and was glad I had done so, for the next moment the curtains were drawn back. Against the light was silhouetted the figure of a man. Then the window was opened, and stepping forward he stood on the balcony. For of all five minutes he remained there, seeming to peer into the blackness of the shrubbery below. At length he drew back, and without closing the window retired into the room and pulled to the curtains.

All I could see now was a narrow slit of light between the thick curtains, and I was wondering what to do next when my eyes fell on a ladder ranged against the wall of the shed. A sudden thought came to me. Measuring the ladder I

calculated it would just reach to the base of the little balcony. If I could only place it without arousing anyone!

With infinite caution I withdrew it from the shed; with many pauses I carried it to the shadow of the house; with beating heart I raised it against the wall. Now I was climbing, halting at every step, my hand ready to clutch at my revolver. But I gained the balcony without any alarm, and softly I slipped over the low balustrade. Not even the most expert cat-burglar could have been more silent. And now I was on the outside of the dark curtains.

Fortune was indeed favouring me. Through the slit I could see the interior of the room. It was long and narrow, and my gaze went straight to its end. For there, almost facing me, was the man I sought.

He was sitting at a table-desk and seemed to be writing. A shaded lamp overhead made a luminous circle on the desk, but though his hands came into the light his head was in profound shadow. In vain I tried to make out something of his face. I had an impulse to leap into the room, and again my hand went to my revolver. But I thought I would wait a little. Above all was I eager to see the face of the man with the bent head. Surely in a few moments he would look up and reveal his features.

So with one eye glued to the aperture I waited. Perhaps, too, the thought of violent action dismayed me, and as I hesitated my nerves began to tingle. It was not strange, then, that a slight noise from without startled me a little. Looking over my shoulder I was dismayed to see that the ladder had changed its position. It was now standing a good six feet away from the balcony and quite out of my reach.

How could that have happened? The shrubbery and overgrown lawn were dark and silent, yet the ladder had been moved. Again I listened, peering down anxiously. No movement, no sound. And there was the ladder too far away to be any good to me, as if it had been moved by some mysterious mechanism. My retreat was cut off. I could not believe my eyes at first, and it was with a feeling almost of panic that I turned once more to the lighted room.

With head lowered the man at the desk was still writing. He did not seem to have changed his position in the slightest, and there was something uncanny in his quietude. If he would only look up! Once again I decided to burst into the

room and risk everything in a stroke of audacity. Then as if in answer to my wish he raised his head. His face came into the light, and to my dismay I saw that it was covered with a mask.

I must admit that the shock of that black visage staggered me. And it was turned blankly towards me. I would have drawn back, but sheer terror seemed to spike me to the spot. Like a bird fascinated by a serpent I could only stare stupidly through the narrow opening. Then before I could recover I saw the hand on the desk rise almost nonchalantly, and realised that it gripped a heavy automatic. Leaning his elbow on the desk he pointed the pistol at the curtain, and deliberately fired. As a bullet ripped past my head I heard him say:

"You may enter, my friend. We have been expecting you."

Suddenly I knew that I had been trapped, and my heart seemed to stand still. And at the same moment, as if by their own accord, the curtains slid back, revealing me.

"Enter!" he repeated in a voice that was lazily ironical. "And do not try to draw any deadly weapon, or I shall be obliged to put a period to your promising career."

Almost automatically I stepped into the room, and as I did so the curtains closed behind me.

"Disarm him, Jacob," said the man with the mask; and from behind the curtain another man stepped. He also wore a mask and pointed a pistol. Keeping me covered, he relieved me of my revolver.

"Now do me the favour to advance."

I did so. I could see that the man at the desk was of commanding height and of wiry frame. Through the mask black eyes gleamed, and above it was a fuzzy mop of crisp black hair. He laid his pistol on the desk before him.

"Bah! A mere boy!" he said in that smooth, mocking voice. "A foolish, reckless boy." Then the voice became edged with irony. "And because you are a fool you thought we too were fools. Let me tell you, O wily youth, never for a moment have you been out of our sight. We watched you in the café on the Champs Elysées; we followed you to the auberge in La Villette; we saw you hide yourself in the car. Our eyes have never been off you. What you did was just what we hoped you would do. Yet had you acted otherwise we were

equally ready. I congratulate you on how you have played your part. And now you are here, willing to answer all questions, to do everything you are bid. It is beautiful, is it not?"

He finished with a laugh in which there was malice as well as mockery. After a moment of oppressive silence he went on:

"We know a good deal, but not everything. We thought at first you were one of Krug's men, but now we are aware you are an American student who lived in the studio of the next house. You got into the apartment by means of a key that happens to fit both doors. What we do not know is: what passed between you and the secretary. But of one thing we are sure – that he confided to your care a certain object."

I stared at the speaker. What was he driving at?

"Don't pretend to be so surprised," went on the voice reproachfully. "You cannot deceive us. You know what I mean. Now you have given us so much trouble, to avoid more and for your own sake, I ask you to give up at once that particular object."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, don't try my patience too far. Well, I'll be more explicit."

From a side drawer of his desk he took a note-book bound in red leather. "This," he said, "is the diary of Professor Krug. It contains the history of how he discovered in Asia Minor the microbe of the present epidemic; of how he reproduced and multiplied it. All the scientific details are here. It is concise and accurate in a way which I, not being a man of science, am unable to appreciate. What interests me, however, is its closing sentence. I will translate it for you.

> 'Here ends the account of my researches into the nature of the causal microbe. Here is the record of the experiments by which I have been able to isolate and cultivate it. Of my further experiments by which I have succeeded in preparing a serum that will effectually destroy it and immunise mankind against its ravages, the full records will be found in the documents I have sealed in the silver cylinder.'

A light flashed on me. Now I understood why they had pursued me so relentlessly. They had only *half* of the professor's discovery, and that the half which did not matter.

The really vital part was contained in the silver cylinder. While they had every means of propagating the pest, they had no power to protect themselves against it. That was the real object of their pursuit – the silver cylinder. And they hadn't got it! With my sudden comprehension joy awakened in me.

"I do not know of any silver cylinder," I said after a pause.

"No one but you can have it. No one but you entered the apartment. We know that the professor kept it in his safe, and the safe was empty. We searched the apartment over and over – examined every inch of it. We are convinced that it is not there. Someone got away with the silver cylinder, and that person could only be you. Now, no doubt you have excellent reasons for not wishing to give it up, but to-night you are in my power. I gave you a fair chance. If you instruct us where we may find the cylinder, with its contents intact, you will walk out of here unharmed."

"But I swear I don't know where it is."

"Come, my young friend! If you persist in denying, I shall have to try a means of persuasion that has never failed me yet."

"You mean you would torture me."

"If necessary – to the death," said the voice cheerfully.

There was a pause, in which came to me the courage of despair. I could not tell them where to find what they sought. Indeed, I wondered if I would tell them even if I knew. But with the memory of the secretary before me I preferred not to think of that. In any case, they would kill me, of that I was sure. Well, if I had to die I would do so worthily. I felt that the man behind the mask was incapable of mercy. I could read that in the cold gleam of his eyes.

"You can't make me tell what I don't know," I said. "And I'm glad I don't. If I did, torture might make me tell. Now you can kill me by inches and you'll be none the wiser."

A long pause. I saw the eyes behind the mask regarding me malignantly. The second masked man drew nearer, and, as if fearing a sudden movement on my part, he raised the point of his weapon.

"You prefer, then, to be tortured to death rather than to tell where you have hid the silver cylinder?"

"I defy you – whoever you are."

He bent forward. His hands clenched as they rested on the desk.

"You fool!" he said – and his voice came as if between gritting teeth. "You don't know what you're saying, but you'll see."

I think at that moment I must have had the courage of the beast at bay. If I was going to be murdered, I at least would see who my murderer was. I would look this man who called himself Sinistra in the face. As I took a step forward he put out a hand and covered his pistol. But I ignored the action. It was not that I was after. I saw the hand rise from the desk holding the weapon. It was now pointing at me, but I did not heed it. Quick as a flash I reached out and ripped away the black mask. Then I dropped it and staggered back, horror in my eyes.

"*Uncle Cyrus!*" I gasped.

CHAPTER XI

WHO IS SINISTRA?

So sudden was my action he was taken completely aback. Then, with a cry half a snarl, he leapt to his feet. For a moment he looked as if he would spring at my throat. His lips were thrown back, baring his clenched teeth; his eyes glared venomously. It was a picture of malevolent rage that appalled me.

His hand tensed on the pistol that for a moment he had lowered. Slowly he raised it again, and so menacing was the action I was sure my last moment had come. There was something deadly in the gleam of those fierce, dark eyes, something devilish in the contorted passion of that face. Steadily he pointed the weapon between my brows, and at the same moment I felt the man at my side pressing a steel barrel into my ribs.

I was lost. A bullet in the brain, another in the heart. Well, it would be better than torture. I closed my eyes and ceased to think. I was as good as dead. . . . I was already dead. . . . I . . . Then I opened my eyes again. The man had sunk back on his chair, his pistol lay on the desk before him, his head was lowered. He still glared banefully, but he seemed to be making an effort to master himself.

"No, death like that would be too easy," he muttered.

For a little longer he continued to glare; when he spoke again his voice was clear and cold.

"A moment ago you had a chance to leave this house alive; now you have none. But there are many ways of dying, and how you will die lies with you. Death may be swift and painless, or it may be attended with exquisite agony. I have no doubt which you will chose. And now tell me – what made you cry out: Uncle 'Cyrus'?"

"At first glance I thought – a fancied resemblance to an uncle of mine."

"You mean Cyrus Quin, the financier."

"Yes."

He bent forward with curious eagerness. "So that's your uncle. And do I truly resemble him?"

As I looked longer I had to confess I had been deceived. The man before me must have been ten years younger than Uncle Cyrus. My uncle's hair was silky white, this man's black and crinkly. In his dark complexion, too, there was a suggestion of the creole, whereas Uncle's skin was of an ivory pallor. Uncle had teeth white and regular, which gave to his rare smile a singular sweetness. This man had fangs, yellow and ill-formed, and in his grin there was something ferine.

Yet even with all that there was enough to excuse my mistake, points of resemblance too striking to be denied. This man had the same high-bridged nose, the same deep-set eyes, the same high cheekbones and lofty forehead. As far as features went the two faces seemed cast in the same mould. Yes, there was reason for my instinctive outburst, after all.

With eyes of mockery he was watching me. "What you tell me is very interesting," he said; "especially as you are not the first who has remarked the resemblance between the great Cyrus Quin and my humble self. Probably, with a little trouble, I might deceive those who know your uncle less well than you do."

He paused, leaning his head on his hand and studying me gloomily. A furrow of thought creased his high forehead. Then he snapped a command at the other man, who still covered me with his weapon. The fellow lowered it. Sinistra turned to me once more.

"You are already satisfied that the resemblance between your uncle and myself is merely superficial but I have a mind to convince you even more absolutely. First of all, however. you will kindly put your hands behind you."

I hesitated. He reached for the pistol on his desk.

"Put your hands behind you, I said."

I did so, perhaps without duly considering, perhaps to humour the man. The next moment I had reason to regret it. There was a click and I felt steel bracelets circle my wrists.

"Cleverly done, Jacob. And now you may take him down and show him. Do not be too long, and if he is nasty you know what to do."

With that he took up his pen again, and, drawing in front of him a large sheet of blank paper, began to write.

The masked man was pushing me to a door on our right. It was the only one, and I noticed the key was in the lock. As we passed through it closed behind us.

We seemed to be in a dark corridor. I went cautiously, fearful of hidden dangers. Yet, as I hung back, above the steel bands about my wrists I felt a steel barrel pressing into my spine. I had still a wild hope I might save myself, and I had no wish to die just then. So, firmly propelled from behind, I advanced in the darkness.

When we had gone some distance along this corridor the man produced an electric torch, and directed its light in advance of us. It revealed a wooden stairway. Descending this, we came to another long corridor that branched off several times. However, we kept straight on, and at its end we reached a stairway of stone. This, too, we descended. The air was now icy cold, and smelled of the underground. I hesitated, but a vigorous dig with that ring of steel decided me.

In the dense darkness the slender light-ray fell on old and mouldering walls, and the air was like that of a dungeon. We passed another stairway, descending still deeper, and went on till we came to the end of the passage. Here was a heavy door of oak, studded with iron, and at the height of the eyes a small window was inset. Opposite this my conductor paused. He seemed to be listening. After a moment, seemingly satisfied, he said to me: "Look!"

I peered through the tiny window into utter darkness. Then suddenly it was light. From a niche in the wall a steady glow illumined the interior. I was looking into a cell, such as in mediæval times might have served to confine the victims of some unscrupulous baron. But my eyes went to a pallet bed that stood just under the light and on which lay the body of a man. The light was vague. I could see only the face in profile, but at the sight of it a hand seemed to clutch my heart.

The light grew clearer, making the figure on the bed more distinct. I saw a long form, lying under a single cover, and thin to emaciation. But now the face stood out very plainly against the dark background. There was no mistaking that strong profile, those cheeks hollowed by suffering, the lips carved in an expression of patient melancholy. It was either Cyrus Quin, or an imitation of him in wax. It might have been that, so still, so clearly pale was it.

"It is my uncle," I faltered. "What does it mean?"

But there was no answer. The light went out again, and once more I was staring into the utter dark. Had it been a dream? Vainly I tried to pierce the darkness, to convince myself that the vision I had seen was real. Then I was conscious of the man at my side pushing me on once more. There was the steady pressure of that pistol-point in my spine. Again I advanced. We seemed, however, to be retracing our steps. Yes, we were climbing the same stairs, returning along the same passages. Soon we were back at the door of the room we had left. My guide knocked.

"Come in," said a soft bland voice.

Sinistra was seated at his desk just as I had left him. He was still writing. The sheet of paper was almost covered with strange characters, and the man's pen continued to form them. But after a few moments he looked up grimly.

"You saw him."

"My uncle! Is he dead?"

"Not yet, I believe. But will I be able to say the same in twenty-four hours? Ah, my poor young friend, that depends entirely on you. The life of your precious uncle is in your hands."

"I don't understand. Why is Uncle here? In that state?"

"Your uncle was able to drive in the Bois this afternoon; this evening on the boulevards the boys were crying his sensational abduction. He was kidnapped at three, in one of the quiet alleys behind the lake. A car ran alongside his, a gun was pointed at his chauffeur's head, your uncle was transferred to the other car. Now he is here sleeping under the influence of a powerful drug. Whether he ever wakes up or not depends entirely on his affectionate nephew."

"It is incredible."

"Incredibly easy. To kidnap a man in plain daylight, under the very eyes of the police, is one of the simplest feats of modern crime. We were unlucky enough to be interrupted by one of the guardians of the park, but a twenty-franc bill and the information that it was a scene for the cinema satisfied him. Ah! the cinema is a god-send to the modern criminal. And now the mighty Cyrus Quin is in my power, and it might be worth a million dollars to ransom him. However, it is not that I am after. If you tell us the whereabouts of the

silver cylinder your uncle will go free. If not——" He finished with a shrug.

"You mean you would murder him?"

"Quite complacently."

"But what good would his death do you?"

"I will be patient, my young friend, and make all clear to you." He took from his desk the crimson note-book. "You have already seen this. You know what it contains. Well, all that is in this has already been discovered. The doctor whom your uncle has put at the head of his laboratory has managed to get so far. How much further makes me tremble for the secret of the silver cylinder. You see, all these men work along certain well-defined lines, and one discovery leads logically to another. The doctor Hetz, though he is disliked by his colleagues of the Sorbonne, is in his line a positive genius. He has the advantage, too, of having studied under Professor Krug, and advances by the same methods. Of all living savants he is probably the only one who could discover the secret of the serum."

Sinistra paused a moment, and looked thoughtfully at the note-book. Then he went on sweetly:

"Thanks to the generosity of your uncle, Hetz has the means at his disposal to make this discovery, and that he will ultimately do so is reasonably certain. But it needs apparatus, a big modern laboratory, assistants, endless experiments. How far he has got towards it I do not know, and it little matters. The dear doctor is doomed. To-morrow he will die suddenly. His death will be attributed to a cardiac crisis. It will really be due to a subtle poison administered in his coffee. There will be no post-mortem. People are so distracted these days, the ordinary machinery of the law is paralysed. Life is appallingly cheap."

Taking up a steel paper-knife, he scratched idly the surface of his blotting paper.

"Not since the days of the Great War has there been such demoralisation. But the worst is that, with his death, all the doctor's papers will have disappeared. The records of his experiments will have vanished. As he is a man who plays a lone hand his assistants will not be able to reproduce his notes. All will be confusion, failure, despair. Then, with Cyrus Quin no longer there to supply them with his wealth, with their chief dead and the records of his researches lost, the

staff of the laboratory will soon break up. There is also the jealousy of his colleagues of the university. Now you see how the disappearance of your uncle will profit me. The secret of the serum will remain my sole property."

Again he paused, digging the point of the paper-knife down in the blotting pad. He continued:

"Nothing can save Hetz. But I give you my word, if you deliver up to me the object in question your uncle will go unharmed."

It was again on my lips to deny all knowledge of the thing, but this time I checked myself. After all, I would die in any case. Why not allow this man to think I had safely disposed of the cylinder? Then he would probably cease his search. Otherwise he would redouble his efforts, and might ultimately find it. Where it was I had not the slightest idea; but it was hidden somewhere, and there was always a danger it might fall into his hands. I closed my lips tightly. Sinistra stabbed savagely at the desk.

"It is as I thought. You know where it is and will not tell. Shall I have to use violent means to make you speak?"

No answer.

All at once he seemed to come to a decision. In the most extraordinary way his manner changed. He dropped the paper-knife, and his face lit up. It was amazing how all the evil vanished from it, leaving it gracious, even urbane. Up to now he had spoken French, but to my amazement he addressed me in English.

"Bravo, my boy! I admire you. You won't tell. Well, I must now lay all my cards on the table. Jacob, you can go. But first take off these handcuffs."

I felt my hands released. The masked man left the room, closing the door behind him. I was alone with Sinistra.

And wonderful indeed was the transformation that had come over him. As he leaned back in his chair his dark eyes softened, his features assumed an expression of kindness.

"Draw forward a chair. Sit there in front of my desk. Have a cigarette? No? Then I will."

From a drawer of his desk he took one. As he lighted it his actions were careless, his manner debonair. More and more I marvelled at the change in him.

"Now," he said, leaning back, "let us get on better terms. I am afraid that the melodramatic scene we have just

indulged in has given you an unfavourable impression of me. Believe me, my boy, I was only trying to bluff you."

"You certainly succeeded."

"Ha! ha! Let's understand each other. But first of all I am going to make a statement that will astound you. You were struck by a certain resemblance I bear to your uncle. Perchance the thought flashed into your head: Like as brothers. It would not have been strange. We are brothers."

A light dawned on me. "You're not – my Uncle Max?"

"I am, indeed, the ineluctable and mysterious Maximus, although it is long since I have heard the name."

"But – I thought you were dead."

"Officially speaking, I have been killed half a dozen times. But that is another story. A volume of stories, if you like. Anyhow, here I am in my latest manifestation, Signor Sinistra, international agent, adept in secret diplomacy; known, as they say, to all the chancelleries in Europe. Even now this letter I am writing in secret script is to the representative of a great Power, promising that I will deliver into his hands the means of destroying a hereditary foe. The only trouble is that, while I have the means of destroying, I have not the means of saving from destruction. One does not grasp a sword by the blade. You get me?"

"I think so."

"To speak more plainly: In this red note-book I have the means of practically exterminating a nation. Death, once unleashed, will flow like a tide. (Do I mix my metaphors? But no matter.) It will overwhelm all mankind. The aggressor as well as his victim will suffer. How few have realised the Might of the Microbe. And this particular microbe is as fertile as it is ferocious. It is the real villain of the piece. Once I let it loose it will devastate the world. Naturally, I cannot sell such an agent of wholesale destruction——"

He blew a delicate ring of smoke. "I cannot sell, I say, unless——" (He smiled with deprecating gentleness.) "Unless I can also sell the means of making mankind immune. The antidote must go with the poison, the serum with the virus. To make my offer to my illustrious friend worthy of being entertained the silver cylinder must supplement the crimson *carnet*. When I have both, the price I will be able to obtain will make me the greatest man in the world."

"And the wickedest."

"I believe I am already that. Just as brother Cyrus is one of the saintliest. He is for humanity; I am for self. To me country comes before humanity, family before country. And because of family, because of the blood tie between us, I am going to make you a wonderful offer."

For a moment he lazily watched the smoke that spiralled above his head.

"First of all I want to ask you: why should you care what happens in this smouldering battleground of a Europe? Why should you worry about these animals of Frenchmen? A decadent race, already doomed. Germany will ultimately avenge herself. You are like myself, an American. What do we care, you and I, what happens here? Let the whole population perish, devour one another. Their civilisation is outworn, their day is done. It is for us to hand on the torch of progress. America will be the greatest world Power in history."

He paused impressively. "And I will be the greatest American."

He paused again. "And you, my nephew, will share in my glory. What say you?"

"What about Uncle Cyrus?"

"Poor Cyrus! He is indeed a fool. We'll let him realise his ambition to be remembered as the world's greatest philanthropist. After all, his fortune will be negligible compared with ours. And now, my dear nephew, it is for you to decide. It is for you to tell me where is the silver cylinder on which all our fortune hinges. Will you?"

"No."

"Remember it's all in the family. Think of me as your uncle."

"I think of you as the world's greatest monster. My sole regret is that I have been unable to rid it of so loathsome a devil. Yet perhaps—— By God!"

A thought had flashed through my brain. That revolver on the desk! My hands were free now. I would grab it, kill this man, shoot down the other, release my uncle. . . . Before he could prevent me I had clutched the weapon. He stabbed at me with the paper-knife and just missed my arm. Then triumphantly I leapt to my feet. Sinistra gave a shout.

Even as he did so I heard a rush in the corridor. It was Jacob running to the rescue of his master. But just as the man hurled himself against the door I sprang to it and turned

the key. Then I swung round to Sinistra, who was staring at me as if stupefied.

"Now, you're going to die!" I cried.

He smiled calmly.

"Do you prefer to take it sitting down or standing up?" I demanded.

"I don't see that it much matters. I feel too lazy to rise. Shoot, my dear nephew."

"I mean to. Here's the death to which you have sent so many. I will count three and then fire. One. . . . Two. . . . Three."

Click! There was no report. I pulled again. *Click!*

He laughed. "You are really too naïve. Do you think I would leave a loaded weapon within your reach? I extracted the shells the moment you left the room."

"Then I'll kill you another way," I said grimly. "I'll smash in your head with it."

Clutching the heavy pistol by the barrel, I made a spring for him. But at the same moment the floor seemed to fall under my feet. With a cry of dismay, I clutched wildly and tried to save myself.

Then I remembered no more.

PART IV

THE SILVER CYLINDER

CHAPTER I

THE ESCAPE

1

DARKNESS! As I opened my eyes it seemed to surge in on me. I was drowned in darkness. It flooded my brain, my heart. It was the blackness of the tomb.

Silence! It weighed on me relentlessly. Inexorable silence. I could hear the river of my blood. There was a crepitation in my ears like the voice of eternity. It was the silence of the grave.

Yet I could not be dead. I was able to move, to touch. Fearfully I fumbled about me. I felt my body, my limbs. Nothing broken, nothing sprained. Thankful for that, I closed my eyes again and tried to think. Bit by bit it all came back, my struggle with Sinistra, its sudden end. What had happened? Where was I?

Cautiously I groped around me. I seemed to be lying on a long low truck made entirely of iron. With my toe I touched what appeared to be a door of iron. That, for the moment, was all I could discover.

Then, as I lay wondering in the heart of that implacable silence, suddenly I became aware of a sound. Some distance off it seemed, and above my head – a soft, slipping sound with frequent pauses. For a moment fear paralysed me. As I listened I clutched the iron truck with the grip of a man on the edge of an abyss. More scuffling, scraping – then abruptly a rush, the fall of a body, a muttered curse.

Someone was crawling toward me. I could hear stealthy movements about me, a presence in the dark. I could even hear breath pantingly drawn. Whoever it was was close now, bending over me. Then a hand touched me and I started convulsively.

"*Tiens!*" said a voice. "You're alive at least. Are you hurt?"

"I don't think so. Who are you?"

A faint chuckle. "Don't you recognise my melodious voice?"

"Julot! But how did you get here?"

"Huh! That's quite a story. First, let's see where we are."

The white eye of a flashlight shot a faint ray all around us. We seemed to be in a dungeon of a longish shape. There were walls and ceiling of stone and a door of formidable thickness. Then the light fell on myself, and I heard a cry of amazement.

"*Sapristi!* Well, if that isn't droll! Do you guess what you're reclining on?"

The light outlined that low iron truck, which I now saw was resting on rails running all the length of the dungeon. The far end of the rails touched the distant wall.

"Come," said Julot, giving me a hand to rise.

As I got up I could not refrain from a groan. Though no bones were broken, I was woefully sore.

"Look! Where the rails end there's a square opening about three feet from the floor. That's the mouth of the chute."

"The chute?"

"Yes, the death-chute. You see, it drops from Sinistra's room a good sixty feet, and at an angle so sharp it just escapes being perpendicular. There's a trapdoor in front of his desk that he can open by touching a spring in the drawer. It falls, and lets anyone he wants to be rid of shoot down without any lingering farewells."

"How do you know all this?"

"Didn't I come down? But that's only a part of the show. The iron trolley stands at the bottom of the chute, and, when the visitor who has outstayed his welcome lands on it, the impact sends it scooting along the rails. To where? you ask."

"To where?"

"To that iron door. Only in your case the door was shut, and you must have hit it with a hell of a bump. However, I imagine that on ordinary occasions it is open."

Here he paused to chuckle a moment. "Yes, it usually allows the car to rush inside. You see, it's the door of a furnace, and by marks on your Hispana Suiza, that furnace is generally red hot. Interesting devil, Sinistra. Goes one better than Landru. Cremates his victims alive. Neat, convenient dodge, isn't it? Undesirables disposed of with efficiency and

dispatch. You press the button and we do the rest. What a joker our friend is!"

"You seem to see the humorous side of it."

"Sure. I see you plunging into that glowing furnace, and sizzling away to a heap of white ash. Our friend Sinistra sits upstairs, and his cigar goes up in smoke, while Harlequin also goes up in smoke."

"Good job for me it wasn't lighted."

"He evidently didn't intend such a *chic* fate for you. And no doubt the suddenness of your attack surprised him. You certainly looked real nasty for a moment. You might have hurt the dear man. Nothing to do but drop you to the dungeon."

"But how do you know?"

"Bless your innocent heart! I saw the whole thing."

"Saw! Where were you?"

"Looking through the window, as you were a little while before. But I'll tell you all, my son – the thrilling story of Julot, the wily one, ex-apache of the Rue Mouffetard. (All rights of foreign translation reserved, including the Patagonian.) You see, Lazare wanted to find out more about Sinistra. Of course Sinistra wouldn't pay that million, as they had failed to nab their man. But he treated them handsomely, telling them at the same time that the hunt was off, and that if he wanted them again he would let them know. That was all. Exit Sinistra. Big Gus, however, was still thinking of the million he'd missed, and nursing a sore head he little dreamed his small pal Julot had handed him.

" 'Who is this mysterious stranger with bunches of money?' he asks. 'He must not be allowed to depart so cavalierly.' I think that where Sinistra made a mistake was in underestimating the Grand Augustus and his faithful band. They are more interested in him than he imagines. Twice they have tried to trail him with their car, but in the darkness of the country he has evaded them. Where was his hang-out? If they could only find it, Lazare saw opportunities for blackmail. But how? . . ."

Julot broke off and grabbed my arm suddenly. "Hark! Don't you hear someone moving in the room above us?"

We listened, but there was no further sound. After a long pause, in a tone even lower than his usual harsh whisper, Julot went on:

"The German Mercedes was too swift for the French Panhard. Then Lazare thought of a motor-cycle, but none of the boys could handle one. That was where little Julot came in. When it comes to running motor-cycles I'm an ace. Never mind how I learnt. Well, I offered to do my best to track the man, and Lazare got me a powerful 'moto' with a special type of silencer. All set, I was waiting near the Auberge des Assassins. As far as speed went it was easy to follow. If Sinistra could do seventy miles an hour I could do ninety. Well, I followed."

"Then it was your light I saw on the road behind."

"Did you see it? That was careless of me. But I had to have some sort of a light. I switched it off whenever I could. And let me tell you you led me a devil of a chase. Several times I thought I'd lost you, and if it hadn't been for the glow of his searchlight I'd have been obliged to give up. On the straight it was easy, but on these zigzag roads I had to keep so far in the rear I almost despaired. However, luck was with me. I traced him here."

"Where are we?"

"In the heart of the forest of Senart in an old château. It's just about as lonely and desolate a place as any prince of assassins could desire. It stands far off the main road, and verges on a gorge that reaches for miles back. He certainly chose his hiding-place well."

"What did you do after you got here?"

"After hiding the bicycle I climbed the wall and reconnoitred. I saw you standing on the balcony, looking into the lighted window. I saw the ladder. Then I beheld a man steal from the doorway and move the ladder. When he had gone I heard the shot, and watched you enter the room. But the curtains were drawn again, so that I could not see what happened next."

"And then?"

"As what was going on inside seemed to be interesting, I decided to be spectator. It was easy to move back the ladder and shin up it. Soon I too was looking in. Oh, it was as good as a drama at the Porte St. Martin. I arrived just in time to see you grab the popgun and frustrate the villain. Then, presto! You vanished through the floor. Sinistra let the other fellow into the room, and, after listening a little, they closed the trap."

"What happened after that?"

"I trembled they might find me, but they were too busy to think of the window. They left the room, turning off the light. Shortly after, I saw them come out of the house and go away in the car. I lay flat on the balcony till the coast was clear, then I entered the room. I soon found the button and released the catch of the trapdoor. But here I was a bit puzzled. My light showed me a square space going straight down for about four feet; but from there it seemed to take a sharp slant. I could see no farther. Wait a moment! First I should tell you I examined that desk like an expert and in a secret drawer this is what I found——"

"The crimson *carnet*."

"Yes, we'll just keep that as a souvenir of our visit. Careless of him to leave it, but I expect for once he was rattled. Well, to go back to the trap – I climbed down to where the chute begins, and wondered how I could lower myself. I did not know how steep or how long it was. At last I thought of the cord of the window curtain. I cut it down, and, getting through the trap again, I wedged my knife to the hilt in a join in the woodwork. Attaching the end of the cord to this, I prepared to descend into the dark unknown. Suddenly I heard footsteps approaching. What to do? I must not be seen, and there was no time to retreat to the window. With some difficulty I managed to raise the trapdoor above my head, and with a click it caught. Good! I was safe under the floor, but how I would get that trapdoor open again I had no idea. However, I had no time to think of that, for I heard someone enter the room."

"Who could it be? Had they already returned?"

"No, that's the strange thing. I'll swear it was a woman this time. I heard light feet and the rustle of skirts. She seemed to be hunting in the desk, and after a little she gave a stifled cry of disappointment. Whatever she sought appeared to have vanished."

"The crimson *carnet*?"

"Maybe. Anyway, after a long search she went away. When I heard the door close again I began to descend. It was difficult, but by partially bracing my body against the sides of the shaft, I managed to lower myself by the cord. Unfortunately about two thirds down the damned thing broke, and I finished the trip with a rush. You know the rest."

"Then we can't get out by the way you came?"

"I'm afraid not. Even if we could climb up the shaf (which I doubt) there's the trap to stop us. Of course as last resort I'll try; but I have another idea."

"What's that?"

"You must stiffen out on that cremation buggy of your and pretend you're still unconscious. Someone's sure to com along presently to attend to your case – even if it's only t fire the furnace. Then when they come in to give you thei tender attention I'll be behind the door to swat them. I'v got my little persuader in my pocket."

By the flashlight he showed me a bit of rubber tubin plugged with lead.

"It's a good idea," I agreed, "if only they come soon Well, here goes."

So once more I stretched on the iron truck and heard m companion make himself comfortable alongside the doo

"It's a case of waiting," whispered Julot. "But we'd bette not speak any more. This château's a queer place. I'm goin to sleep. Rouse me if I snore."

Not another sound from him. I almost felt as if I were alon in the darkness again. Lying on the iron frame I was far fron comfortable, and the strain of waiting began to get on m nerves. I dared not move from my original position, flat o my back, with my feet pointed to the furnace.

We must be in the underground part of the château, thought. There must be all kinds of dungeons and secre passages. I had not had time to say anything to Julot abou Uncle Cyrus. As for my relationship to Sinistra, I had n intention of ever saying anything about that. No use re vealing the skeletons of one's family cupboard. No us complicating matters, no use—— So thinking, and mor weary than I had imagined, I, too, fell into a doze.

2

It was with a thrill of excitement I became wide awake Hooked to the ceiling above me a small lamp was shining and, mindful of the part I was playing, I closed my eyes again I had the impression that through the aperture in the doo someone was watching me. This feeling gave me such

sensation of fear that for assurance I turned my head slightly in the direction of Julot. There he was, crouching in the shadow of the wall. His eyes gleamed darkly in his white face, and his posture was like that of a panther ready to spring. For a long time we remained thus; then once more the light went out and we were separated by inky darkness.

We dared not speak now, but listened for the slightest sound. Soon from the direction of the chute I heard what seemed to be footsteps on the floor of the room above, then a sudden cry as of dismay. No doubt they had discovered the disappearance of the crimson *carnet*. I had a moment of fear that Sinistra would open the trapdoor and all would be revealed. But evidently his suspicions did not dart in that direction. There were further sounds as of agitated conversation, then a spell of silence.

I was wondering if I dared whisper to Julot, when, as if by magic, the light flashed on again. But this time I heard low voices at the door. There was a withdrawing of bolts, the rasping of a big key. They were coming at last. I braced myself.

Subdued almost to a whisper I heard the suave voice of Sinistra. "Go ahead. He's still unconscious."

By the cautiously opened door the masked man entered. For a moment he stood on the threshold, took one step forward, paused. And in that pause Julot jumped. He seemed to leave the floor as if projected by a powerful spring, and with his whole weight landed on the man, who crashed beneath him. At the same moment I made a leap for the door.

From the other side someone was trying desperately to close it, but one foot of the fallen man had jammed in the doorway. I tugged furiously at the door, calling on Julot to aid me. The latter, who had been struggling on the floor, now managed to bring his bit of tubing into play, and for the moment his opponent ceased to count. Then he added his efforts to mine, so that with a jerk the door opened wide and we both fell back.

"Quick!" I cried. "It's Sinistra himself. We must get him this time."

However, the man seemed to have vanished in the darkness of the corridor. We could hear his light, quick feet.

"Shoot!" I cried again.

Twice Julot fired his revolver in the direction of the sound,

and in the deafening echo we plunged in pursuit. But at the end of the passage we were halted by a stairway of stone.

"He's gone up that," said Julot. "I can hear footsteps above us."

We dashed up the stairway, Julot leading. At the top, however, was another passage, and on going some distance along it we came to where it branched off to right and left.

Which way had the man gone? We listened, but all was still again. Silence absolute.

"I'm afraid he's escaped," I said at last. "The underground part of this château is a regular maze. We'll never find him."

Nevertheless we searched the passages to right and left, but discovered that each branched off in turn. Indeed, we became a little confused, and were glad to regain the main corridor.

"We're wasting time," said Julot. "Better go back and secure that chap I tapped on the head. A nice juicy knock I gave him. If he's not a corpse, he's pretty near it."

So, feeling baffled, we retraced our steps; but when we reached the head of the lower corridor a cry burst from Julot.

"We left the light in the cell burning. Now it's out."

By the glow of the flashlight we raced down the passage. At the door of the cell a surprise awaited us.

"*Parbleu!* The bird's bolted."

"You didn't hit him hard enough after all," said I. "See! there's blood on the floor leading down the corridor."

"Yes, but it's smudged. That man never got away by himself. He was dragged by someone."

"Perhaps by the mysterious woman."

"Probably. Let's see."

We traced the stains till we came to an iron door that seemed to be bolted from the other side. Here we halted, completely baffled.

"They've managed to get him away. No use looking farther. The sooner we get clear of this place the better."

"It's a very interesting place," observed Julot. "I'd like to see some more of it."

Suddenly I remembered. Uncle Cyrus! It must be in a cell on this floor the old man was confined.

"Come then," I said. "We'll explore a little farther."

I examined every door carefully, and at the very end of the

corridor I found the one I sought. There was a tiny grille, and an electric light switch beside the doorway. As I turned it a light glowed within the cell. Looking through the grille, I saw my uncle again. He did not seem to have moved. He lay like a figure in wax. Julot was peeping through the grille over my shoulder.

"Who's the bloke?" he demanded. "Looks dead to me."

"Heaven grant not. Let's get to him."

The door was locked; but the key still remained, and in a moment we were inside. Julot bent over the old man.

"No, he's all right. Seems in some sort of a trance. Doped, I guess."

He lifted an eyelid. Only the white of the eye showed. He felt the heart.

"Beating faintly. Well, we'll get him out of this."

But Uncle Cyrus was heavier than we had bargained for, and by the time we had carried him up two flights of stairs we were breathless. In the hall opposite the entrance we laid him down very willingly. Now we could see how large and rambling the place was. Our footsteps sounded loudly in what seemed a deserted house, and the air was close and clammy. I was glad to throw open the big front door and let in the fresh breath of the night.

"The car's there," I said.

"Yes, we'll borrow it. You drive, and I'll follow on my bike."

We lifted the limp body of Uncle Cyrus into the car, and arranged him as comfortably as possible. Then Julot threw open the gate, and, switching on the motor, I purred my path to the road. There by the white glow of the lights I felt my way through the forest. When we gained the main route we were able to go faster, but as we reached Paris the dawn was breaking.

All the distance Uncle had lain on the long, low seat like a dead man. I was alarmed for him.

"We'd better take him to a doctor right away. Ah! this is the gate of Vincennes. Doctor Hetz!"

For I remembered that the famous savant lived in the Avenue St. Mandé, close by. With a little trouble we discovered the house, and the bell was answered by a sleepy maid.

"Yes, monsieur. I'll tell the doctor you wish to see him on business of urgent importance."

In a few minutes Doctor Hetz appeared. I saw a giant of a man attired in pink pyjamas. He had a big, untidy black beard and lambent eyes. As he stared at us he looked decidedly unfriendly.

"What is wrong?" he demanded in a deep bass. He had a strong German accent, but his gestures were dramatically French.

"We've found him. He's out there in the car."

The doctor did not need to be told whom we had found. Doubtless the fate of the missing millionaire had been worrying him. His manner changed entirely.

"You've found Monsieur Quin! Thank Heaven! How is he?"

"Unconscious, I think. We'll bring him in."

"At once, at once. I must see to him."

The doctor helped us to carry in the limp form. There was no doubt that Uncle Cyrus was under the influence of some drug.

"This is very strange," grunted Doctor Hetz. "Who are you?"

"His nephew."

"*Tiens!* Well, you can tell me all about it later on. We'll get him to bed."

Julot had disappeared. With the help of the maid we got Uncle Cyrus on a bed, and the doctor applied restoratives. It was not long before the patient opened his eyes and stared wonderingly about him.

"Where am I? What has happened?"

Then as he recognised the doctor and myself his face lighted up.

"Among friends. I was so afraid it might have been enemies. I remember – I remember a black car and a man who pointed a pistol at my chauffeur. Then another man leapt into my auto and – that's all I remember."

"Yes, you were brought here," said the doctor soothingly. Aside he made a sign to me. "No use exciting him," he whispered. "He'd better know nothing about the kidnapping for awhile. He's badly shaken and must have rest. If he was alarmed it might bring on another shock."

He took me by the arm and led me away. "You must tell me all about it, young man, but another time will do. For the present I am satisfied to have him restored to us. You have no idea the anxiety I suffered on his account. Quite

apart from my personal appreciation of him, I cannot carry on my work without his aid."

He paced up and down a moment, a grotesque figure in those pink pyjamas.

"As it is, I fear I have evil news for him. My papers, my records, all my data have vanished from my cabinet. I don't understand it. I know that my brother scientists of the Sorbonne are jealous of my investigations, but I will never believe their rivalry would drive them so far as to rob me. Well, we live in queer times. The country is in terrible danger, yet these professional feuds stand in the way of our efforts to save it. Is it not sad? For the glory of a discoverer I do not care at all, but I want to save France, to preserve humanity."

"Take care, doctor. Your own life is in danger."

"Absurd! What could happen to me?"

"Many things. For one, poison. I was afraid it might already have been administered."

"I am nervous and keyed up, but I don't think I am suffering from the effects of poison."

"Where do you usually take your morning coffee?"

"At the laboratory."

"Then don't drink any this morning, doctor, please."

"I won't. I'll have it analysed. But it's absurd. However, thanks for the warning. In future I'll take great care. For myself I don't matter, but my work – that's important. . . . Now, you look very tired. Go and get some sleep. Come back in the course of the day and see how your uncle is."

CHAPTER II

LOVE AND A LOCKER

1

I RAN the car into the nearest garage, and took a room in a little hotel near the Place de la Nation. There I threw myself on the bed, closed my eyes and sank into a sleep of utter exhaustion.

To my chagrin when I awoke it was six o'clock in the evening. I had slept all round the clock, and my plans for the day were ruined. However, all fatigue had disappeared, and as I dressed rapidly it was almost with a feeling of elation.

After all, had I not accomplished something? The crimson *carnet* was in the hands of Julot; and no doubt it would more than replace the records stolen from Doctor Hetz. Also I knew that the silver cylinder was still missing. Sinistra had not obtained possession of it, but, on the other hand, supposed that I had. Doubtless he would now make a desperate effort to secure it, and would stick at no sort of bloodshed.

I must be more careful than ever. For the present I was safe, but the moment he returned to Paris the danger would begin.

Although I was convinced of the identity of Sinistra and my Uncle Max, the kinship was so revolting I resolved to ignore it. To me the man was only a ferocious adversary in a game of life and death, and maybe I would baffle him yet.

Now that I was not, for the moment at least, a man with a price on his head, I knew that Lazare and his gang had no interest in me, except, perhaps, from motives of revenge. Big Gus and Crevetto had a personal score to settle with me, and this time it would be blade or bullet. I must keep well out of their way.

My first effort must be to get in touch with Julot. Julot had taken the professor's note-book, and it was important that it should be in the hands of Doctor Hetz without delay.

But where to find Julot? It was improbable that he knew where I was at that moment, and I did not want to advertise my presence by visiting any of his usual haunts.

My impulse was to go to the doctor's and find out how Uncle Cryus was; but reflection convinced me of its imprudence. Not only my uncle's house, but that of the doctor would be the first places to be watched. So I contented myself by engaging a taxi and driving along the Avenue St. Mandé. . . . Ah! my suspicions were confirmed. There in a near-by café, evidently watching the house, sat the unsavoury youth called Coco.

So then Sinistra had already returned, and the wolves were seeking my trail. The thought rather thrilled me. There was, after all, a joy in evading pursuit, like in a nerve-tingling, breathless game. But I must find Julot at once. Suddenly I thought of Casque d'Or. She might be able to help me.

2

I ate in an obscure restaurant of the Faubourg; then by side streets made my way to the Zone. Here I felt safe enough. In the vague light everyone was an indistinguishable shadow; so I dodged among the ramshackle cabins, worming myself to the open space where stood the *roulotte* of Casque d'Or.

Its door was closed, its interior dark. From the Café du Rome came shouts and cries. Things were lively in there. I was tempted to enter, but a sense of danger restrained me.

Suspicious of every shadow, I continued my prowling walk. Twice I returned to the *roulotte* to find it dark and silent. It was a third time, and long after midnight, when I saw a dim light in the window. But as I put my foot on the step I hestitated. I heard her crying.

Yes, she was sobbing, deep sobs with poignant intervals of quiet. Between the curtains, through the window in the upper part of the door, I could just see her. Her arms were curved over the table, and her head rested on them. All I could really make out was a spread of gleamy hair. That explained the stifled nature of her sobs. I knocked.

There was a full minute of silence. Out of delicacy I

descended; after a little, I ventured to knock again. At that she opened the door. I expected her face to light up; but no – a look almost of terror came into it.

"You!" she whispered.

"You think I'm a ghost?"

"They told me you were dead."

"I've been precious near to it."

"Did anyone see you come here?"

"I don't think so. I've been most careful."

She peered over my shoulder into the shadows. Then: "Come in quickly."

She closed the door and locked it. Also she shuttered the windows. After that she faced me.

"You know it's perilous to come here."

"For you? I'm sorry. I'd better go."

"For us both. No, stay a little. You've changed."

"You too, Casque d'Or. You were crying."

"I wasn't. What should I be crying for? For you, perhaps?"

"For the cussedness of life generally."

"Pah! I'm used to that. I wasn't crying. I was laughing – maybe."

" I'm glad I was mistaken."

She stood with her back to the table looking at me defiantly. Her hair fell on her shoulders and sheened in the light. Its ends, reaching below her waist, formed ringlets. But her uptilted face was sharp and anxious. She was pale, with shadowed eyes. I laid my hands on her shoulders, but she shrank back.

"Tell me quickly why you came. Sinistra returned to-night, and they had a meeting. Lazare wouldn't tell me what it was about. He said they'd killed you."

"The brute exaggerated. What I came here for was to try to get in touch with Julot."

"He was not there to-night. Sinistra gave them a lot of money, and they were all drinking. I slipped away. But to-morrow I'll try to find him. Where shall I tell him he'll meet you? Better make it the evening."

"Nine o'clock then. Say the Café des Bons Enfants in the Rue Mouffetard."

"I'll do my best. And now you must slip away at once."

"Are you expecting someone?"

"Perhaps. Please go."

"Can't I wait a little? I want to talk to you."

"About what?"

"About yourself. What about Spain? About a caravan?"

But she shook her head. "That was only a silly dream."

"Come, Casque d'Or. As soon as I've finished my job we'll go away together."

I tried to take her hands, but she repulsed me.

"No, no. You speak out of pity. Our paths don't lie together. Go away and leave me. I'll be all right."

"Listen, Casque d'Or; I believe I can care for you as much as most men care for most women. Here and now I beg you to marry me."

"Would you have asked me that if I had not saved you from Lazare that night in the garage? Come, my friend, an honest answer."

"No," I said reluctantly.

"Me, too, I say no. It is good of you, but I am only a *fleur de pavé*. No, go away and forget me."

"But I fear you will be unhappy."

"On the contrary, I will be happiest if you do that. And I will never forget you, never. But we are of different worlds."

"I'll be of your world."

I had a vision of her world at its glittering best: fairs and junketings, wanderings and campfires – a simple life, rich with the wisdom of the nomad. All that was primitive in me responded, and my grip tightened on her shoulders.

"Come, Casque d'Or, I'll be your mate, your man. Your people will be my people, your ways my ways."

But she shook her head, her brown eyes broodingly fixed. Her resistance fired me.

"Take me, Casque d'Or," I urged. "I'll become one of you. I'll fit in. I'll live the life."

"You'd be interested for awhile, then you'd sicken of it. You'd always be an outsider. In the end you'd leave me, break my heart. No, it is better to say good-bye now."

I knew she was right, but, drawing her close, I made a last effort.

"Come, Casque d'Or. I'll love you always. I'll never leave you."

As if she was struggling with herself, she shut her eyes. Then:

"No, no, I'm wiser than you in this. I'm not really thinking

of myself. You're welcome to break my heart. That doesn't matter. But we'd both be wretched in the end."

I felt she was seeing clearly. My hands slipped from her shoulders to clasp her fingers.

"I shall be afraid for you," I said. "If I could only see you happily married to another?"

She smiled with a twisted mouth: "Who knows."

"And what of Lazare?"

"I'll slip away from him."

"When?"

"As soon as you're safe. As soon as France is safe. . . . But now you must go. You don't realise the danger."

Her gaze was sadly fixed, her hands limp. I might at least kiss her, I thought. I had never kissed her. Better not, though. . . . Yet I was bending to her lips when I felt her start. Her eyes went wide with fear.

"There's someone coming!"

I heard heavy steps, then a foot on the ladder before the doorway. Tense with terror, she stared at me. A hard knock at the door roused her to action. She lifted the lid of the locker that ran the length of the caravan, and made signs for me to get in. I hesitated, but another savage knock decided me. Stepping into the locker I knelt down. She let fall the lid.

"Who's there?" I heard her say with a stifled yawn.

"It's me – Gustave. Why don't you open?" More hammering on the door and a volley of oaths.

"I'm just going to bed."

"Let me in. If you won't it's because you have another man with you."

"I haven't."

"Open and let me see."

"Will you go away after that?"

"Yes, but open."

Cowering in that stifling darkness, I heard Lazare enter the caravan. He closed the door after him and, lurching forward, he sprawled on the locker.

"It's all right, Casque d'Or. You've no one. I'm satisfied. But I'm not going away just yet. I've brought a bottle, and we're going to finish it between us."

He banged the bottle on the table, then sat back on the locker. "Get the glasses."

She seemed to hesitate. Evidently he had been drinking heavily, and was in a truculent mood.

"One glass then, and promise you'll go. You've already had too much."

"All right. Hurry!"

He thumped the locker with his fist. I heard the cork drawn, liquor being poured out, the clink of glasses.

"Here's to us," he hiccupped. "You belong to me, don't you, Casque d'Or?"

"Of course, Gustave. But to-night I'm nearly dead. Drink up and let me get to bed."

"Ha! You're in a hurry to get rid of me. I don't like that. You know I'm jealous, Casque d'Or. But God help the man that comes between us. I'll kill him like I'd kill a fly."

Once more his heavy fist pounded on the locker just above my head.

"You've no need to be jealous, Gustave."

"Haven't I! Well, let me tell you I have. I know there's someone else. And what's more, I've got him where I want him." (Another thump on the locker.) "I've found you out, you slut. I'm going to kill him first, then I'll fix you. You won't want anyone but little Gus when I've done with you. I'll teach you to have a lover – under my very nose."

What devil's game was he playing? Had he seen me enter and was torturing us both? I heard her voice falter.

"There's only you, Gustave. Don't be foolish. As if I could look at another man when there's you? Come, drink and go."

"Why not stay? If you care as much for me as you say, you'll let me stay."

"I'm too tired. To-morrow night if you wish. Please leave me, Gustave. Really, I'm dropping with fatigue."

"I won't bother you. I'll be quiet. I'll sleep on this locker."

He laughed jeeringly. Of course he knew. He was amusing himself with our terror.

"You wouldn't be comfortable," she pleaded. "Oh, do go. My head's splitting. Have some pity on me."

His answer was to rise and lock the door, taking out the key.

"There! I stay. You fool. You think I don't know everything? There *is* a man, and he's – not very far away right now."

He sat down again on the locker. "Ha! Ha! my girl. D'ye think I haven't been watching you. You see this knife – many's the time that bright blade has run red. It's sharp as a razor. I whetted it specially for your lover, and now I'm going to stick him like a pig."

With a powerful stab he stuck the point of the knife deep into the lid of the locker. He was enjoying her terror. "That's how I'm going to stick it through the ribs of your lover to-night – *when he comes to see you.*"

My heart gave a leap. Was it possible he meant someone else? He hadn't seen me, after all. I heard her repeat blankly:

"When he comes to see me!"

"You think I don't know. He's coming to-night – *Crevetto.* You know he's crazy about you. He wants to steal you from me. But I'm on to his game."

"You wouldn't kill him! He's your comrade."

"If he was my blood brother I'd kill him. You wait and see. He'll come to-night. He'll find us together. We'll fight here and you'll watch us. I'll make a stiff of him under your eyes. And now, girl, we'll finish that bottle. Come——"

I heard him rise and clutch her. He was trying to wrench away the wrapper she wore, trying to reach her lips. A cry of pain burst from her.

I rose at that cry. I could see Lazare's broad back as he bent Casque d'Or over the table. I stepped from the locker. With a start Lazare released the girl and swung round.

For a moment he was all amazement. Then came comprehension, fury, malignant joy. Quickly these emotions swept across his face, leaving it cold, grim, implacable. He felt for the knife; but he had left it sticking in the wood, and as I lifted the lid of the locker it had fallen behind. So with a roar he came at me, his hands out-clutching. Desperately I struck, then closed. We were locked together, swaying, straining, Lazare grunted as he tried to pinion my arms. Then, putting a foot behind, he tripped me up, and crashed on top of me.

Now he had me at his mercy. But it would be a double triumph. He would not kill me. He would deliver me over to Sinistra. The million would be his alone. Oh, it was luck and so easy! All this I read in his face, as his hands were at my throat and he was squeezing all consciousness out of me.

Frantically I strove to lessen the pressure of those relentless fingers. I choked. My eyes began to protrude, my face to blacken. As through a mist I could see that contorted visage above me, baleful-eyed, gloating. Then from behind it suddenly I saw another face, that of Casque d'Or. In the same moment the exultation went from Lazare's eyes. They opened so wide there was a white ring all round them. A cry of distress broke from him. His hands unclenched. . . . I was free.

What had happened? In a flash I saw. Casque d'Or! A length of her hair was wound round the neck of Lazare, and she was pulling with all her strength. He was trying to wrench away that rope of gold, trying to shake her off. But she fought like a fury. Frantically I looked for some weapon. . . . The bottle on the table! Catching it by the neck, I smashed it at the man's temple, and with the force of the blow it broke. In a welter of blood and wine Lazare went down.

Pantingly we looked at him.

"He's not dead," said I.

"I wish he were."

"What will we do with him?"

She pointed to the locker. "There! Tie him up."

"With profound pleasure."

I bound Lazare, drawing the small rope she gave me till it bit into the flesh. Then between us we lifted him into the locker and closed the lid.

"He won't be suffocated?" I demanded. "We don't want to deliberately kill the brute."

"There are enough chinks to breathe by. And now we must get away, both of us this time. As soon as they discover him my life is forfeit."

We found the key where he had dropped it, and, going out, she locked the door. She gave a sad look at her caravan.

"I don't suppose I'll see it any more. It's been like a home to me. I've been happy there."

"Give me the key," I said. "I must come back and find some way of disposing of our friend. I'll get the advice of Julot on the subject."

"That's right. I've great confidence in him. I'll try to see him at once."

"Will you go now – tired as you are?"

"Yes. I may have trouble to find him."

"How can I help you?"

"By keeping out of the way. Get a good rest. Guard your strength for to-morrow."

We parted at the Place d'Italie, she going in the direction of Belleville, I returning to my hotel near the Place de la Nation.

CHAPTER III

THE UNDERGROUND RIVER

1

My first thought the following morning was of Uncle Cyrus.

Poor old chap! I should have asked for him yesterday. He might be dead for all I knew. I must inquire to-day without fail.

On reflection, however, it did not seem so easy. As I already knew, the house of Doctor Hetz was watched, and I had no doubt the Villa Cæsar was also under surveillance. Sinistra would expect me to call there, and have spies posted. Ah! The telephone!

Happily there was one in the hotel, and after the usual exasperating delay I obtained the connection. Weast answered me. I thought his voice sounded queer, but perhaps that was due to the instrument.

"Hullo, Weast! Have you heard how Uncle is?"

"He's here, Mister Harley. He was brought home yesterday afternoon. We can nurse him better here."

"Of course. How is he?"

"Very poorly, indeed, sir. The work of two years wasted. Most unfortunate."

"Is he conscious?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Is he seeable?"

"I fear not, sir. The doctor gave strict orders he was to be disturbed by no one. Rest and quiet, he said, were absolutely necessary."

"Righto! I say, Weast, your voice sounds odd. Agitated like."

"It's little wonder, Mister Harley. It's——"

Here Weast seemed to choke.

"What's the matter?"

"It's terrible, sir. I don't like to tell you over the 'phone. Could you come round to the house?"

"Not just at present. But you'd better tell me."

"It's Miss Dale, sir."

"She's not sick, too?"

"She's *dead*."

I nearly dropped the receiver. For a moment the shock seemed to paralyse me. When I spoke it was in an awed voice.

"I can scarcely believe it. How did she die so suddenly?"

"She didn't die in her bed, sir. That's the bitter part of it. Miss Dale was as well as you or I, Mister Harley. Last night she went out rather late, saying she was going to post a letter. Well, she didn't return, and this morning an inspector came to say that her body had been dragged from the Seine. It's lying at the morgue."

Weast broke off incoherently. He was evidently blubbering. I waited to let him get back his self-control. Then:

"What was the trouble, Weast?"

"None that I know of, Mister Harley. Miss Dale worked hard, but she seemed to have no particular worry. Why should she?"

"How do you think she met her death?"

"I believe somebody did her in, sir, and chucked her over one of the bridges."

"Did she have any money or valuables about her?"

"To the best of my knowledge, none at all. She simply said: 'I'm going out to post a letter. I'll be back in half an hour.' "

"What do the police think?"

"They seem to think it's a case of – suicide."

"I don't believe it. She was not that sort."

"So I told them. But the head one, Inspector Dulac, seemed to have theories of his own. Made himself a regular nuisance, he did. Turned the whole place upside down. Questioned everyone, asking the most extraordinary things. He even tried to see the master. I never saw such a stupid. There's not much hope of clearing up anything so long as a man like that's in charge of the case. Suicide, indeed!"

"It's terribly sad, Weast. I can't realise it. Is there anything I can do?"

"Nothing for the present, sir. You might leave me your address, and I'll 'phone you if anything fresh turns up."

I hesitated. I was ashamed of this disreputable hotel. But, after all, what did it matter?

"All right. Hotel du Nègre, 1 Rue des Boulets."

"I have it. Good-bye, Mister Harley."

"Good-bye, Weast. And remember me to Uncle."

I returned to my room and sat down on the bed. Mona dead! Poor, poor girl! What new mystery was this? Suicide – no! Yet she worked so hard, and she had fainted in that extraordinary way. It might be that she was neurasthenic. Perhaps the kidnapping of my uncle had affected her. Or she might be in some trouble we did not dream of. What could Weast know? She wasn't likely to confide in a valet.

And what was in the letter she went to post? Had she posted it, or had it been found on her? In it, probably, would be found the explanation of her death. Perhaps that pig-headed Inspector Dulac might not be so far out, after all.

Well, there was nothing to do but wait and see. For the moment I had too many other worries to puzzle my head over this. So, with a sigh of pity and regret, I dismissed her from my mind.

2

It was nearing nine o'clock, and I was awaiting Julot on the terrace of the Café des Bons Enfants.

From where I sat I could look down the steep, unsavoury street. By day the Rue Mouffetard seethes with sordid humanity. Its houses are mouldering with age: its doors are dark tunnels burrowing into decrepitude. Yet once they were houses of distinction; and where the court gallants entered, sword in hand, the apache now slinks along with sash that hides a wicked knife.

By night the Rue Mouffetard is as subdued as by day it is vociferous. In an evil half-light, sinister shadows haunt it. Policemen parade it in threes. Every second door is a narrow bar known as a *zinco*, and in its dim depths men with faces entirely evil forgather.

The Café des Bons Enfants is a gloomy tavern, much frequented by the garbage-rakers of the Rue St. Medard. In front is the celebrated Marché des Puces, where they sell the most marketable of their finds. Although it was cold, I had taken a seat on the terrace of the café, and there

I waited anxiously. Had Casque d'Or failed? But no, I was sure Julot would come.

Half-past nine and no sign of him! As time went on I began to realise how much I depended on the man. His activity and resource, added to his knowledge of the underworld, made him an ally beyond price. But there was more than that. Whatever had been his history, Julot sometimes revealed a knowledge that was not only of the streets. In the midst of slang would slip out a word only a man of some education could have used. It was strange, but I was fast getting the impression that the little apache was more than he seemed. He had an uncanny *flair* for finding out things, as if he tapped some secret source of knowledge. Then he had unexpected accomplishments – that of driving a motor-bicycle, for instance. But, apart from a growing sense of the man's mystery, I had absolute confidence in him. I would trust Julot to the limit.

Why did he not come? Had Casque d'Or failed to find him? It was drawing on to ten o'clock. . . . Then suddenly I felt my heart halt sickeningly. In the bar of a *bistro* across the street a man was twisting a cigarette. Too well I recognised that long, lank, khaki-clad figure. No mistaking that lantern-jawed face with its squinting eyes. Teu Teu, the tenacious.

Once again I had been tracked. But how? I had been so careful – keeping out of sight all day. There was something strange about this. Anyway, one thing was clear: all my caution had been wasted, and there was Teu Teu on my trail.

What was I to do? If I went away, I would miss Julot. If I stayed and Julot came, Teu Teu would see him. Despairingly I tried to think of a solution, should I avoid meeting Julot, or let Julot be discovered as my ally? While I was considering a form shuffled out of the darkness. The old gatherer of cigarette ends!

He peered about the terrace of the café, his pointed cane in his hand. Suddenly he seemed to spy a stub under the table at my feet. He bent down and hooked it up, at the same time dropping a tiny bit of folded paper. Without a word away he shuffled.

Quietly I put my foot over the paper. After a little, pretending to tie my lace, I picked it up. Opening it in the hollow of my hand I read:

"Go Hotel des Arabs, Rue des Allouettes, eleven o'clock. Demand room thirteen. Keep in middle of street."

My heart beat hopefully again. Julot had not failed me.

3

As I walked away from the café I was painfully aware that Teu Teu was following me. Others, too, I had no doubt. Nevertheless I reached my objective without interference. It was a villainous-looking hotel in a villainous-looking street, and the landlord was one of the most villainous-looking men I had ever seen. In answer to my request for "number thirteen," he ushered me upstairs without a word, and flung open a door. Then, conspicuously avoiding to switch on the light, he went away.

I locked the door. It was the ordinary hotel room with the usual dirty eiderdown, cheap pine wardrobe and washstand. It smelt "buggy." But what attracted me was a door that connected it with the next room. After a moment, I went over to the window.

It looked into the street, and in a doorway opposite I could make out a dark figure lurking in the shadow. Sitting down on the only chair, I waited.

The connecting door was moving slowly. Little by little it opened, and, as I watched it nervously, a short, dark figure slipped into my room. By the reflected light from the street, I recognised the chalk-white face and coal-black eyes of Julot.

"Hullo, Harlequin. That time the fat was nearly in the fire. However did you let them get on to you?"

"I can't understand it."

"Well, the next thing is to give them the slip again. It isn't easy, though. There's Teu Teu, with Coco, the Sailor and Biftik helping him. It would be funny if they let you wriggle through their fingers. However, that's just what you are going to do. Leave it to your Uncle Julot. But tell me all that has happened since I saw you last. I mean *all*, without reserve this time."

I rather wondered what he meant, but as briefly as possible I told him of my meeting with Casque d'Or, and the besting

of Lazare. He chuckled hugely, as if the whole affair had been funny, instead of being nearly tragic. To think of the Grand Gustave trussed like a capon and shut in a box!

"*Sapristi!* But she has qualities, that girl! The more I see of her the more I admire her. Why don't you marry her, Harlequin?"

"I offered to, but she won't. Thinks I'm asking her out of gratitude."

"And are you?"

"Well, I suppose that enters into it."

"A proud little devil. If I were not such a shrivelled shrimp I'd ask her myself. Whatever happens, we mustn't leave her in the lurch. And now to wriggle through the net. Wait a moment."

He slipped into the other room and returned in about five minutes.

"They're watching the house, front and back. One of them tried to get a room, but the *patron* told him he was full up. A good friend of mine, the *patron*. I helped him once in a difficulty. For the moment, the way is clear, but we must lose no time."

Locking the door after us, we crept down a narrow winding stair. The house was one of those senile structures that are propped up by their stouter neighbours. The proprietor lived in a closet in the basement, but when we reached it all was dark. Only a dim light in the vestibule illumined the street door. A bell gave warning when this door was either opened or shut. There was another door leading to the back, but it was locked on the inside.

"Quick!" said Julot. "Follow me."

Under the stairway was a smaller door. He opened it, and we descended a steep flight of steps, closing the door after us. No sooner were we down in the darkness of what seemed a cellar, than we heard the street-bell ring excitedly.

"That's them. They're making another attempt to get into the house. They'll try to square the *patron*. If necessary they'll use force. We got away just in time. When they find you're not in the room, they'll follow us down here, but we've got a good start."

He flicked his flashlight till it fell on an iron trapdoor set in the stone floor. It lifted on hinges and revealed a round shaft that seemed to penetrate to the very bowels of the

earth. The light showed only blank emptiness, but an iron ladder was clamped to the masonry.

"Descend," said Julot, briefly.

I had a moment of hesitation. The hole was black as bitumen. From up it came an air damp and charnel-like.

"Go on. Quick!"

The tone was so imperative, I obeyed. Julot descended after me, carefully closing the trap. We were both clinging to the rusted ladder in a tube-like shaft of cement.

"Where are we going?" I faltered.

"Never mind. Keep going," snapped Julot.

Step by step, I descended. There must have been over a hundred of them. I moved quickly, so that Julot should not tramp on my fingers. I was wondering if the descent was ever going to end when I heard the sound of running water. Rapidly it came nearer till it seemed that the ladder plunged into it.

"Step off," said Julot. "It isn't deep."

I felt the bottom cautiously. I was up to my knees in icy water that flowed very slowly past. Soon Julot was beside me.

"Bah! it's cold," he muttered.

"Where are we?"

"In the underground river, the Beivre. Follow me. There should be a ledge along which we can crawl."

We found a narrow coping of slippery stone and crept along it. Below the river chuckled icily. In our way live things scuttled, and jet-like gleams appeared and vanished.

"Eyes of rats," laughed Julot. As we advanced the rats scurried only a few feet before us, dropping with a plop into the black water. The roof dripped a pattering rain. The air had a cryptlike closeness that made breathing difficult. The odour that came from the sluggish stream was not exactly nauseous. It was acrid and unpleasant, the odour of ancient and legitimate rottenness. Once I slipped and plunged into the water. Julot laughed heartily.

"What are you trying to do, Harlequin? I didn't know you were a *fervent pour la nage*. Why don't you take a header when you're at it?"

"It's not nice of you to laugh at me."

"Pardon! Anyway we can both laugh at Teu Teu. He's

a demon on the trail, but here's one he'll never follow."

I went on without further mishap. On both sides of us the gleam of damp masonry met the light, and the surface of the sluggish water was ink black. Once a roaring startled me. It came from just overhead.

"The Metro. By that same token we should be nearing the Seine."

He was right; for soon the tunnel widened, and the air grew fresher. We crossed several iron trestles under which ran other channels.

"The main sewers," said Julot, flashing his light up one of those dark tunnels. "Ah! At last. The outlet."

The water ran under an iron grille, and beyond it I could hear the powerful flow of the Seine. Deliciously I breathed the fresh welcome of the night. Julot found a small gate in the grille. It was padlocked, but with a skeleton key he quickly had it open. In a moment we were standing on the quay. Above us I saw a sky spattered with stars, and beyond the lamplit river the majesty of Notre Dame.

Padlocking the gate, Julot led the way. My feet were sopping, my teeth chattered.

"Come," he said; "I know a little grog shop where we'll be safe. A few hot drinks won't do us any harm."

As we started off I heard the bells of half a dozen steeples striking midnight. Ten minutes' brisk walking brought us to the Halles, where the markets were just awakening to their nightly activity. The streets of approach were blocked with carts laden with vegetables from the country, and the army of porters was already donning its working garb.

Into this eddy of nondescript humanity we plunged, and in a narrow alley that branched off it we stopped before the closed door of a small *buvette*. Julot peered in, then entered, and I followed. The air of the place fairly caught at the gorge. At a long table half a dozen Algerians were gambling. They were a greasy, cut-throat crowd, who stared at us uneasily. Then they went on with their game.

A very old woman came forward, and I saw Julot make a secret sign to her. She led the way to an inner room, where we sat down.

"*Bon soir*, Mère Gaspeau. Fetch us two bowls of your good onion soup, and two big glasses of hot grog."

As we drank and supped we gave our boots and socks to the

witch-like creature, who dried them at a small stove. Her manner to Julot was almost fawning.

"Have you done her a service, too?" I asked.

"Never mind. She's afraid of me."

As our shoes steamed, we renewed our energy with tripe and fried potatoes. Julot did not speak. His black eyes had an expression of brooding thought. His white face, seamed and lined, had yet the sharp whiteness of a cameo, and his crisp, blue-black moustache pointed belligerently to his ears. With his smooth white hand he kept twisting it upward. Staring at it over the steaming grog, I found myself wondering if it was real. As if he read my thoughts he remarked drily:

"A *type* once tried to pull it off. Further events no longer interested him."

I started. Phrases like that made me suspicious of Julot's real character. Through the crust of the apache the bourgeois outcropped.

"What's the next best move?" said he, staring hard at me. "You can't help me much, Harlequin. That grog of the Mère Gaspeau has so muddled your head you can't think clearly."

Cheerfully I admitted it. A happy reaction had set in, and I was feeling very well indeed.

"All right, my fuddled friend, I'll tell you what we must do. First we must put the Grand Gustave in a place of safety. We must deposit that ferocious fellow in some secret spot where he will be kept a prisoner till the fun's over."

"Do you know of such a place?"

"I do. But how to get him there discreetly? Ha! the black Mercedes. We'll squeeze him in behind. Come. We'll seek the garage."

A sleepy garagist recognised me, and let me claim the car. But it was Julot who steered it out swiftly, and remained at the wheel. He drove like a professional, so that soon we were at Bicêtre. Halting the car in the darkness near the *roulotte* we both got out.

"We won't back it up," he said, "till we see if the coast's clear."

All was silent. No one showed an unhealthy curiosity in our actions, which discretion is characteristic of the Zone. As we approached the *roulotte* we quickened our steps. The door stood open. Flashing his light, Julot put his hand to his

hip. But there was no sign of anyone within. Beside the long locker was a dark puddle.

"It's not blood," said I. "It's wine – mostly. He's in the locker."

"I think not," said Julot, grimly. "You didn't leave that door open?"

"No, I have the key."

"Someone's been here. But we'll soon see."

Cautiously entering, he lifted the lid of the locker.

"He's gone!" I gasped.

"Isn't that evident," snapped Julot. Then he made a spring out of the *roulotte* and sprinted for the car. I followed. As he leaped in, some dark forms emerged from the shadows, running towards us. But already Julot had the car in gear. As I sprang on to the running-board it shot forward. Down the opening between the huts we swished, but still the black figures were after us. As we gained the long, straight boulevard, Julot swung into it and stepped on the gas. We whizzed past another car that stood alongside the road. At the same moment a startled cry came from it.

"Lazare's Panhard," breathed Julot. "Look back. Are they following us?"

"Yes. We're right in the glare of their searchlight."

"Well, if they want to catch us, they'll have to go some."

As if it wanted to leave the ground in its eagerness, the swift Mercedes was roaring along the arrow-straight road.

"If a tyre bursts," said Julot, joyfully, "we'll turn a somersault. Are we beating them?"

"Yes, they're farther off now. I can only see their headlights in the distance."

"Come on, you beauty! We'll show them how to gobble up the kilometres."

In a few minutes we were out in the open country, and soon after we seemed to have left our pursuers far behind.

CHAPTER IV

THE JEALOUSY OF JULOT

1

When day dawned we were driving through one of the main roads of a great forest.

Suddenly, with an expiring sigh, our motor stopped. Julot swung the car into a space amid the leafy cover, and steered it till its momentum was arrested.

"No more petrol," he grumbled. "Good job it didn't happen before. A rotten mistake on my part, and I suppose we'll pay for it. There can be no village nearer than six kilometres."

"Where are we?"

"In the forest of Senart."

"But are you not afraid to be here again?"

"On the contrary. It's the last place they'll seek us. They will never think we would return to a neighbourhood from which we have just escaped. Once, when the police wanted me very badly, I took a room next door to the Prefecture. They were raking Autervilliers for me when, dressed like a little bourgeois, I was living in the next house. Ah! the joy of being chased. Or chasing. There's no game like it. No, I came here because I considered it the last place to expect pursuit."

"Where do you calculate to go?"

"To the château."

"No!"

"Why not? At least we will not encounter Lazare or any of his friends there. Besides, I am curious about it."

"I'm not. I never want to see the place again."

"Please yourself, Harlequin. You need not accompany me, but I assure you I mean to revisit the château to-night."

"It will be dangerous."

"What would life be worth if it were not dangerous? But you can stay here."

"No, I'll go if you do."

"All right. And now as we seem to be hidden, we might as well enjoy a few hours' sleep."

The car had, indeed, run into a little glade and was with difficulty seen from the road. Julot opened the lid of the long compartment in the rear, and crawled in. Huddled on the seat I tried to sleep, but without success. Finally I fell into a troubled doze, conscious that I was very cold, and with an uneasy sense of danger.

When I woke, the morning was advanced, and beyond the bushes the road was bathed in sunshine. I walked about till I became warm. Then I returned to the car and peeped inside the rear section. To my surprise Julot was not there.

When had he gone? And where? He might have told me. A little aggrieved and somewhat anxious I seated myself in the car again. The time hung heavy on my hands. In spite of our midnight supper at Mère Gaspeau's, I was devilish hungry. Somehow my mind dwelt on bacon and eggs, with fresh rolls and hot coffee. How delicious such a breakfast would be, here in the forest!

It must have been close on midday when Julot returned. He was carrying two cans of petrol.

"It's all I could manage to pack. The cursed village is a good two hours' walk from here. But we should run fifty kilometres on that."

Straightway he replenished the tank, then drew from his bulging pockets some bread and cheese and a bottle of wine.

"I expect you're hungry?"

"But you?"

"I had an excellent breakfast at the village inn. Bacon and eggs and hot coffee and new bread."

"I wish I'd gone with you."

"You were sleeping so profoundly, it seemed a pity to disturb you."

Though demurring to this, I ate eagerly. After a little, Julot demanded:

"Have you got a cigarette paper? No? Then any bit of paper will do."

As I felt in my pocket my fingers closed on two folded sheets. The first was the address of Rosemary that Mona Dale had typed for me; the second, the note of warning I had

received from Sinistra. I was looking at them rather ruefully when Julot said sharply:

"Let me see those."

I handed them over. He seemed to study them a moment, then tapped with his finger the one that contained the address.

"Who typed that?"

"My uncle's secretary, Miss Mona Dale. Why?"

"You are indeed a stupid young man, Harlequin. Have you no eyes at all?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, resentfully.

"Cannot you see that this address and the note of Sinistra are typed with the same machine?"

"You're mistaken."

"Possibly, but I think not. Look. In each case the letter 'r' is a little out of alignment, and the top of the 't' is broken slightly. I could show you other points of resemblance, but what's the good? I couldn't convince you."

"Of course you couldn't."

Rather contemptuously he handed back the notes. "In any case, guard them carefully. You might find them useful. I'll make my cigarettes out of this parcel paper."

2

Again he disappeared, and, left to myself, I examined the notes carefully. There was no doubt as to their similarity. For instance, the upper half of the letter "o" was blurred, and the dot of the "i" almost invisible. However admirable she might have been as a typist, Mona Dale was not very particular about the cleanness of her machine. The more I studied, the more I discovered points of similarity. Yes, both were written on the same machine; and as I realised this, something like consternation fell on me.

What could Mona Dale have to do with this affair? Now I remembered her fainting-fit, and it had a new significance. What was behind it? And her sudden death? It was all too deep for me. Having been pals with Mona made it the harder to fathom. So pondering vainly, and greatly troubled, I waited for the return of my companion.

It was late in the afternoon before he turned up. He looked

tired, and curling himself on the seat of the car, he lit a cigarette.

"I guess you're right about these notes," said I.

"Of course I'm right, Harlequin."

"But how – I can't explain."

"Perhaps your uncle's secretary could."

"I'm afraid not."

"Why?"

"She's dead."

He did not seem terribly surprised. He merely remarked: "How did she die?"

"She was found drowned in the Seine."

"Suicide?"

"Murder, I say."

"In that case she's no good to us. We can be sorry she's dead and no doubt others can be glad."

"What do you think about it?"

"She might have been a spy of Sinistra."

"Mona in league with that man! I'll never believe it."

"She might have been in his power and obliged to obey him. The nature of her death suggests that he must have terrorised her."

"But do you think he was responsible for her death?"

"He may have decided that her usefulness was ended. She knew too much and was dangerous to him. . . . Did she say anything to anyone? Who saw her last?"

"Weast, my uncle's man. She said she was going to post a letter."

"What's become of the letter?"

"Perhaps she managed to post it."

"In that case it will no doubt reach its destination and we will then know more. Who is handling the case?"

"Chief Inspector Dulac."

"That muddlehead. Farewell to all hopes of a solution."

"Is he no good?"

"The biggest bonehead on the force. Only his luck is proverbial. He flukes his way to success."

"Let's hope he will this time. . . . By the way, what have you done with the crimson *carnet*?"

"It's in a particularly safe place."

"We ought to deliver it to Doctor Hetz."

"In good time, my young friend."

"But it's so urgent. The pest rages. What's in that notebook may be an invaluable aid to him."

"You leave that to your Uncle Julot. Remember, it's the document in the silver cylinder we're after."

He closed his eyes and the subject at the same time. I looked at him with some perplexity. He was curt and irritable these days. But perhaps it was because he was tired. Things were not going any too well.

I wondered if I ought to tell him of my relationship to Sinistra. But the idea of kinship to that monster so horrified me I could not bear to admit it. No, that was a family matter, and as long as I could I would keep it secret.

Julot opened his eyes. "There's one thing that's troubling me."

"And that's?"

"The safety of Casque d'Or. Now that Lazare's free again her life's not worth two sous."

"She can hide."

"Ah! my poor friend, you don't know the underworld of Paris. It's infested with spies. The police themselves have a system of secret information that lets little escape them. The Sûreté could not function without the *indicateur*. He is everywhere. An agent of the secret police walks along, a *type* brushes past him, a paper is pushed into his hand. Nothing is said. But that night an important arrest is made. No criminal has ever been known to evade the police for long. None but myself, and all because I play a lone hand. I have no friends, especially no woman friends. Most bandits are betrayed through women. Ah! the *sacré* spies! They are everywhere."

The troubled frown deepened on his face.

"When they hear that she has betrayed her friends, the whole underworld will be on their toes to get her. That's the worst, to be false to one's band. All will fear to harbour her, and most will be glad to trap her. In the underworld news flashes like an electric current. None can escape, especially none so well known as Casque d'Or. Her hair alone gives her away, and she is more or less of a public character."

"Did you know her before you met her through me?"

"Only by sight. As I told you, I'm a bit of a woman-hater. I never speak to them. I had seen Casque d'Or playing in the *bals musettes*, and had heard of her reputation!"

"Her reputation!"

"Oh, I don't mean a bad one. That would have been too ordinary to arouse comment. It's because Casque d'Or had a good reputation that she was so much remarked. She kept the men at a distance. That old Gomez used to look after her like a father. If she ever had a lover, she was devilish discreet about it – and what can a man ask for more?"

"She once told me she had cared for an American soldier who was killed in the war."

"That may be why she fell for you, Harlequin. Ah, if I had the luck to win the love of a girl like that, I wouldn't give it up in a hurry. She's a great girl, one in ten thousand."

"You said one in a thousand the last time."

"Next time I'll say one in a million."

Suddenly his face corrugated with fury. From his dark eyes flames seemed to shoot.

"If anyone harms a hair of her head," he snarled, "I'll flay him alive. You mark my words – what I say, I do. And if I can't get a man with a knife or a gun, there are other ways. But, believe me, in the end little Julot will fix him."

"Perhaps they'll be too much occupied with my case for the moment to bother about Casque d'Or."

"Yes, there's that. If she hides well, she may be safe for a day or two. To-night we'll hunt the château, and to-morrow I'll break back to Paris and put her in a place of safety. In the meantime we'll hope for the best."

"Are you not afraid to revisit the château?"

"Fear, so far, has not figured in the list of my emotions. I have wanted to feel it, and have put myself where I ought to have felt it. What I really felt was a thrilling of the nerves. That is not enough. I want to feel real fear, hair-raising, spine-creeping, paralysing fear. That's why I'm going to the Château of the Devil."

"Do they call it that?"

"Yes, in the little village. Legends say that one of the old seigneurs was a devil-worshipper, and that his ghost haunts the place. I'm told it now belongs to a Brazilian, who bought it for a song and rarely occupies it. The last time I was away I saw it from a distance. It's only some five kilometres from here."

"Do you think we may find anything that will help us in our search for the silver cylinder?"

"One never knows. I have a curious instinct in these things, and I have a feeling to-night's work will hasten the end – whatever that may be."

This was all he would say. He closed his eyes, and for the next two hours he slept.

3

In the deepening dusk we were finishing the bread and cheese when he looked round with a start. He seemed to be pricking up his ears. I listened also, but all I could hear was the hum of a distant auto. That, in itself, was nothing strange. At least a dozen had passed during the day.

"What do you bet that's a Panhard?" said Julot.

"You mean to say you can tell a car by the sound of the motor?"

"Some I can. Quick! Let's see."

We ran to the edge of the road, and, lying flat under a bush, we waited. As the car swished past I felt my arm clutched.

"Did you see? A big limousine painted claret colour."

"Yes, Lazare's car."

"Lazare was driving and Crevetto sat beside him. You didn't happen to notice who was inside the car?"

"No. The blinds were drawn."

"I wish I knew."

"Where do you think they're going?"

"Looking for us, no doubt. They've probably had news of us on the road. In some of the villages we passed our car could not escape notice. They'll drive on awhile, then, when they find we've gone no farther, they'll return to search for us here. You have the gun I gave you?"

"Of course."

"Keep it handy. You may need it before this night's over."

"One good thing: while they're hunting us, Casque d'Or is safe."

"Yes, there's that to it. For to-night, at least, I don't think we need concern ourselves about the fate of Casque d'Or."

CHAPTER V

THE CHÂTEAU AND THE CHARNEL PIT

It was nine o'clock when Julot started the motor and we crawled out of the wood.

How good it was to feel strength and speed under us again! But we drove slowly and with dimmed lights. When we came to the turning that led to the château, Julot did not take it. About a kilometre farther on, however, he swung into a side road that was more like a track in the forest.

"I guess I'm the first man to take a car over here," he remarked grimly, as with many bumps and lurches he cautiously wormed his way. "But it's safer. When you're playing a game with a *type* like that you don't want to take any chances. We're approaching the château from the rear."

What with the gloom and the ruggedness of the road, it took all his skill as a driver, and it was after ten when we suddenly emerged from the forest and halted on the edge of a great open space. As far as we could see, there was only a wilderness of savage rock and ravine. The moon was in its first quarter, with a fair congregation of stars, so that the scene was revealed in all its brutality. In fantastic crag and boulder there rolled beneath us a stormy sea of stone.

"Look! The château," said Julot, pointing.

The gorge at this point was narrow and steep, and on its other side I could just distinguish a spectral castle. Vague and mysterious it bulked against the black forest, seeming to poise on the very edge of the ravine.

"How are we to reach it?" I asked.

"There's a trail."

Backing the car into the cover, he led the way down a goat-track amid the rocks. The path was so dimly defined he had to use his flashlight. It twisted and turned, it dipped suddenly, it heaved abruptly. In places we had to wedge ourselves between huge boulders; then again we seemed to be entering a *cul de sac*.

"A regiment could hide here," I remarked, as we paused

for breath in a ravine where we could see nothing but crag and sky.

"Aye, a regiment of bandits."

From then on we started to climb, and soon arrived at the base of a cliff. The trail zigzagged up it hazardously, and we had to aid ourselves by clutching at the ferns. At last we gained a rocky rise that took us to the very wall of the château.

"Let's have a shoulder," said Julot.

He climbed on my back, and, once astride the wall, gave me his hand. As we dropped softly into the grounds the moon obligingly went behind a cloud.

From the rear the building was shaped like the letter "E." The back of the letter represented the old building, and the two sides were wings of more recent construction. At first we had to crawl through a tangle of shrubbery; then this gave way to a wild, overgrown stretch of lawn, which in turn yielded to a weedy courtyard. There was a ruined fountain, statues, and other witnesses of past grandeur; while beyond them, dark and silent as if it had been abandoned for ages, loomed the château. In its solitary stateliness it had the sadness of desuetude and decay.

"Stay here a moment," said Julot, halting me in the shadow of the fountain. "There are several doors that might yield to my *rossignol*."

He took a master key from his pocket and slipped across the lawn, but soon he returned. "All bolted on the inside. We must find another way."

Keeping together, we gained the shadow of the nearest wing. It had two stories and a castellated roof. There were three oak doors studded with iron, which Julot had already tried. Continuing, we turned the angle of the wall to the main building. All the windows were shuttered, and in the central building they were also barred. As if to form the centre of the "E" there was a square, castellated tower, with an approach of three steps to what seemed the main doorway.

Frowningly Julot looked at this door. The lintel was overhanging, and was supported by the torsos of two women sculptured in the stone. About five feet above the door was a small round window.

"Let me get on your shoulders again," said Julot.

Raised thus, he managed to reach one of the sculptured

figures, and, clinging to it, he worked himself up to the lintel of the door. From there he was just able to catch the edge of the circular window. To this, too, he hoisted himself. I could see him framed in the round opening and working busily. Then he disappeared inside, and a few moments later, with a soft withdrawing of bolts, the door was opened. I slipped in, and Julot once more bolted the door.

"Keep your *rigolo* handy," whispered Julot, as he played his flashlight gingerly about him. It revealed a small hallway which opened into the main hall of the château. On either side arched the grand staircase. Listening with every step, we softly advanced. At the foot of the stairway Julot hesitated, staring up fixedly. Was it an inkling of danger that made him decide not to go farther in that direction? Did he think someone watched in the silence? I wondered. Now that we were well launched on the adventure my heart was beating in my ears, and my fingers twitched on my automatic.

Julot was ferreting about, and presently he found a door leading to the lower quarters. Descending a stairway, we came to a stone corridor from which other passages branched off. Gaping doors showed cellars with flagged floors and rough walls. Other doors were locked mysteriously. Everywhere was ruin and decay, crumbling plaster, rusted iron, rotted woodwork. The air was dank and stagnant. Not even a rat could have lived in such a place.

Then we found another stairway going deeper still. It was circular and very steep, so that it seemed to plunge into subterranean depths. It ended in a large cellar from which branched several passages. Choosing the largest of these, we proceeded carefully along it, to find our progress at last checked by an arched door. To our surprise this yielded to us, letting us into what seemed to be a large vault. As he played the light on the wall, Julot gave an exclamation. Just inside the door was an electric switch.

"*Tiens!* Funny thing to wire the dungeons. However, there's sure to be no current."

He turned the switch, and to our amazement the place was all lit up. We stared in wonder. We were in a vault that seemed to be hewn from the living rock. A score of pillars curved to the masonry of the roof, making me think of the crypt of a church. To our right was a deep alcove where an altar might have stood.

"It looks like an underground chapel," I said.

"The chapel of a devil-worshipper," said Julot in an awed whisper. "But put to modern uses to suit a modern devil. Look!"

He pointed to various objects ranged around the walls. At first it was difficult to realise their nature, but when I did so I had a shock.

"Instruments of torture!"

"A regular museum of them. Enough to furnish a dozen chambers of the Inquisition. This Sinistra seems to be a virtuoso."

And indeed in the wall spaces were samples of every agent of the art of torture, ancient and modern. There were racks and thumbscrews, boots and maidens, pulleys and swinging knives.

"Even a Chinese cage," said Julot. "The Chinese were great ones at it."

I shuddered. I still had vivid memory of the mutilated secretary. But what he had suffered was nothing to the refinements of torture that could be inflicted in this chamber of horrors. Here were instruments of modern make, the use of which I could only conjecture.

"I guess Sinistra could give even the Chinese points," I said. "The very sight of these is enough to make one confess one murdered one's grandmother. So this is a sample of what was in store for me. Well, I'd like to give the beggar a dose of his own medicine."

But before I could examine the things closer I was again startled. Julot had switched off the light. Hard-breathing, we stood in the tomblike darkness.

"Did you hear anything?"

"I thought I did."

"Do you know," I whispered, "I've a feeling that we've been watched ever since we entered the house."

"Imagination! Who could it be?"

"What about that woman you heard last time?"

"I thought it was the cry of a woman I heard just now."

We listened awhile, but there was no further sound.

"Let us continue our exploration," said Julot. "This is even more interesting than I bargained for."

We made our way across the pillared vault to a door at its end. This opened on a passage which ended in another

of those circular stairways, very old and ruinous. Evidently we were now in the womb of the ancient castle, amid ruins that dated back to mediæval days.

"Shall we go down there?" said Julot, hesitating.

"Might as well. We must now be in the den of the old devil-worshipper. I expect this is the haunted part. Don't go butting into any ghosts."

Julot still hesitated.

"Go on. You're not afraid?"

"I'm not afraid of anything material, but this place is uncanny. Seems as if we were disturbing the spirits of the past."

Nevertheless he descended, going slowly, for the footing was treacherous. At the bottom the passage was a mere tunnel.

"I don't see the use of continuing," said Julot, his feeble light making little impression on the darkness that seemed to congeal around us. "We might as well be in the catacombs. We are in the very bowels of the earth now."

"A little farther. Let's see where this passage goes to."

We had to bend as we walked. I kept very close behind him, and once or twice I felt him start. Was it possible that the intrepid one was getting the wind up?

"Look out for the ghost," I whispered.

"Bah! Don't talk of ghosts now." He crossed himself. Then the next moment he uttered a cry of real terror. His light vanished, and at the same instant there was a dull thud. Putting out my hand, I found that he was no longer there.

Rigid with fear I stood. Then I heard a groan and it seemed to come from below my feet. I listened. Again a groan. I put out a foot, but felt – *nothing*. Before me was emptiness. Another groan.

"Julot, are you there?" I cried.

Faintly from below came his voice: "Look out! The passage ends in a pit."

"Are you hurt?"

"I don't think so. I can't have fallen far. There are no bones broken."

Once again the flashlight gleamed out. Another cry from Julot, this time of undoubted horror.

"You seem to have fallen on broken bones, anyway," I said.

"*Mon Dieu!* Yes. A regular charnel pit."

As he flashed his light about him it rested on nothing but old yellow bones crumbling to dust. There were fragments of broken ribs, shanks, shins, clutching fingers, shoulder-blades. Skulls grinned up at him. He stood on a heap of human bones, piled in confusion.

The highest part of the heap seemed to be just below the opening, and presently Julot, who had recovered something of his nerve, climbed up on this and raised a hand.

"Can you reach me?"

Bending far over, I was just able to catch the outstretched hand.

"All right. You'll be able to help me out. But first I'd like to see a little more. This heap of bones slopes down a considerable way. It seems to be a kind of a cave, for the walls are solid rock. I'm going on a little."

I saw the light grow dim, then vanish. After a long moment it reappeared. Julot came under the opening and stretched out his hand. I pulled with all my strength, and the little man, finding a toehold in the wall, scrambled out.

"A nasty fall, all the same," he panted. "A good nine feet. I admit I was scared. But I'm glad. I know real fear now. Also I made a discovery."

"Yes – what?"

"I wondered why the air down there was so fresh. I scrambled over the bones till I felt a distinct current. I had gone about twenty yards when the bones ceased; then, a little farther on, the rocky walls closed in and almost met. Almost – not quite. There was a narrow hole a man might squeeze through, and beyond – sky, a star."

"An outlet!"

"Yes. I expect it gives on the face of the cliff, on which the ancient part of the castle stands. I wonder if others know of this?"

"Sinistra's sure to know."

"Perhaps not. Even the most morbid of men would shrink from exploring a charnel pit. I wonder how all these remains come to be there? Something to do with the bloody past and that devil-worshipper. The bones are old, old. Well, we won't worry about them. We'll get out of here as fast as we can."

It was with relief we gained the dungeons above, traversed

the torture-chamber and climbed to the first of the underground floors. We had reached the stair that led to the hall when I clutched Julot by the arm.

"Did you hear that?"

We listened nervously. This time we were not mistaken. Clear and piercing came a woman's cry of agony.

After a moment we crept up the stairs, and at the top again we listened. However, there was no further sound; and in the darkness of the great hallway we paused at a loss. We had moved with intense caution, so that so far we had no reason to suppose our presence had been discovered. Above all, we must avoid detection.

Again at the foot of the grand stairway Julot looked up; but the same instinct for danger decided him that great risk lay in that quarter.

"The cry seemed to come from the left of us, and from the second story," he whispered. "But if we go that way I fear we'll meet someone. Let's see if there's no other."

Under the arch of the stairway we found a narrow passage that seemed to lead in the same direction as the main corridor above, and along this we crept. Whoever the woman was who had screamed, she was now silent, so that we had nothing to guide us. But some distance along this passage, where the left wing of the château began, we found a narrow stair that led to the second floor. Up this we climbed, and arrived at a traverse corridor that separated the wing from the main building. Here we shrank back, cowering low, for close to us we heard voices.

"Look!" I whispered.

About midway down the corridor, high in the wall, there was a light. It seemed to come from a small, square aperture.

"A ventilator connecting with a lighted room," said Julot. "I'd like just to see what's going on in there. Do you think you could give me a back up?"

For the third time that night he stood on my shoulders, but he was unable to reach the opening.

"I can't make it," he whispered.

"Stand on my head," I breathed back, bracing myself.

By doing this he was just able to peep over the edge of the ventilator. In my neck I felt the veins swell. . . . Would he never have done? Then I was relieved, for the little man stepped down on my shoulders.

"I saw – I saw a friend of ours," gasped Julot. "But can you stick it another moment? I want to make sure."

I said I would try, so that once more Julot mounted on my skull. Fortunately he was quickly satisfied this time. He slid down, and rejoined me on the floor of the corridor. On the other side of the wall we could still hear voices, but too faintly to distinguish words. Julot seemed to be suffering from some great emotion.

"Who do you think your mysterious woman was?" he panted.

"Who?"

"Casque d'Or!"

CHAPTER VI

WHAT HAPPENED TO CASQUE D'OR

1

And now to account for the presence of Casque d'Or in the château. I have been able to do this by her own clear account of all she saw and heard, leaving the rest to conjecture and imagination.

Crevetto, that suave Sicilian, whose ambition it was to buy a decaying palace on the Gulf of Catania, had conceived a violent passion for Casque d'Or. The jibes of Lazare were far short of the truth. He burned with desire, and only the grim possessiveness of the Grand Gustave restrained his ardour. If Casque d'Or expressed a preference for him, he would throw down the gauntlet, and they would fight for the girl.

Full of this resolve, he rose in the middle of the night and made his way to Bicêtre. It was three o'clock in the morning when he arrived at the *roulotte*. What if she slept! He would awaken her and find out his fate.

But as he made to knock on the door he stopped and listened. Surely he heard a low moan from the interior. He tapped gently. There was a strangled cry of pain. He shook the door. There was a snarl like that of a wild beast. Taking from his pocket a jointed jemmy, he forced the lock.

The first thing he saw was a crimson pool that covered the floor. Fearfully he thought it was blood, but was relieved to find it was only wine. Anxiety for Casque d'Or was tearing at him. Where did the groaning come from? Ah! the locker.

He opened it, and was not a little amazed to discover Lazare. With secret satisfaction he regarded the plight of his rival, and noted the savage way the cords bit into him. But as Lazare, still cramped and groaning, explained what had happened, Crevetto schooled himself to sympathy.

"We must find her, then I'll cut her heart out, the hussy!" stormed Big Gus.

"It should be easy to find her," said Crevetto. "But the American – that's the one we want. Sinistra will be furious when he learns you've let him escape again. When will you see the Signor?"

"I won't see him. I've arranged to communicate in writing. You know the fountain on the Place de la Concorde, close by the Rue Royale? Well, he wants us to leave a note in the mouth of the dolphin nearest the Strasbourg statue. The fountain's dry at present."

2

In the atelier of Crevetto that gave on the yard of the Lapin Vengeur they framed in code a letter to Sinistra, explaining the affair of the *roulotte*. Then, giving it to Biftik to place in the mouth of the dolphin, they retired to rest.

About nine o'clock that same morning a slim man of most unnoteworthy appearance descended from the Hotel Crillon, took the note, and disappeared. About two hours later Crevetto, sauntering past, found another note in the receptacle.

It was in the cipher they had arranged, and read thus:

"*Party staying Hotel du Négre, Rue des Boulets. Capture this evening.*"

"That's simple," said Lazare. "But how did Sinistra get on his track so quickly? Anyway, we won't let him escape this time. Take the job in hand yourself, Crevetto. Get all the help you need, but make sure of him. At the same time I'm going to unleash the dogs on the trail of Casque d'Or."

Crevetto enlisted the aid of Coco, Biftik, the Sailor, a red-headed chauffeur known as the Roquin, and Teu Teu. With such a pack it would be indeed marvellous if this stranger managed to get away.

On his side, Lazare called on the forces of the underworld to track his prey. By its thousands of ramifications news spread that Big Gustave was offering a reward of a thousand francs for any information that would lead to the capture of Casque d'Or. Her discovery would be only a matter of hours.

Having done this, he bought a bottle of brandy and went to bed.

It would be easy as far as the American was concerned; so easy that Crevetto left things in charge of Teu Teu, and he, too, went on the trail of the girl. He did not want her to fall into the hands of Lazare if he could save her. The capture of the American was to be made that night, and he was to be taken to the atelier behind the Lapin Vengeur. In the meantime five good men were watching him.

By nightfall Casque d'Or had not been found. Lazare was in a drunken sleep, and Teu Teu had telephoned that the American was at present sitting on the terrace of the Café des Bons Enfants. Crevetto telephoned back that he was coming right away, and leapt into a taxi. When he reached the café, the Roquin was waiting there to tell him that the young man had taken a room in the Hotel des Arabs. Taking the taxi again, they were soon on the spot.

Teu Teu was worried. They had all the exits guarded, but the landlord would not admit them into the hotel. The room the young man had taken was dark and silent. Of course he was there, sleeping soundly, but it might be as well to make sure.

He roused the landlord, and, after a short conversation, he and Teu Teu went up to room thirteen. Picture their consternation to find no one there! No sign even of the room having been occupied. Wrathfully they returned to the landlord.

"What have you done with our friend?" demanded Crevetto in menacing tones.

But the landlord protested angrily:

"What do I know of your friend? You must not make a row and disturb my *locataires*."

"Are there no other exits except the two doors?"

"Monsieur sees. The house is small, narrow. No one could leave it, even by a window, without being observed."

"What about the cellars?"

"Monsieur is free to examine them."

A search of the cellars was without result. There was nothing to do but keep guard till morning, and, with an uneasy feeling that he had been duped, Crevetto returned to the Lapin Vengeur to make his report to Lazare. He was in the midst of this ungrateful task when their private telephone

rang. Crevetto took down the receiver. No need to ask whose was the voice.

"Have you got him safe?"

"I don't know."

"Explain."

Crevetto gave an account of what had happened. At the other end of the line there was an exclamation of impatience and disgust.

"Fools and bunglers! Of course he's got away. What about the *roulotte*? Are you watching that? Don't you realise that he will come back? Americans are a humane race. They would never let a man die, however worthless he was. Is Lazare there? Can I speak to him?"

Crevetto handed the receiver to Big Gus.

"Ah, Lazare! Your wretched carcass is supposed to be tied up at this moment in the locker of the *roulotte*, is it not? And even now they may be there to put you out of your misery."

The idea excited Lazare. "All right, I'll be there, too," he said.

"Also do your best to get Casque d'Or. The chances are the two are together. Find the girl and you'll capture the man."

"I'll get the girl all right."

"Good. Report to me at once by the usual channel." He rang off sharply.

"Curse the fellow!" growled Lazare. "But there's something in what he says. Crevetto, you might go. Biftik will drive you in the car. Take Teu Teu with you. My head's cracking."

Hugging his bottle, he again retired to bed. This was about two in the morning, and shortly after three he was aroused by Crevetto.

"Did you see any sign of him?"

"The man himself."

"*Bon sang!* Where?"

"Just as we arrived at the *roulotte* he came out. There was another man with him. We made a rush for them, but they had a car waiting. They jumped into it and were off like the wind."

"The devil! Another man!"

"A short fellow."

"It couldn't be Casque d'Or in male clothing?"

"No, he was too thick-set. Besides it was he who took the wheel. A wonderful driver."

"Who could it be? Crevetto, I begin to see another hand in this. That young fool, all by himself, couldn't baffle us for half a day. Who is the other?"

"Well, they're both well away by now. You'd have to search half France to find them."

"Then I suppose there's nothing to do but break the sad news to the *patron*."

3

It was early that afternoon they heard of the hiding-place of Casque d'Or. Remembering that she was a great friend of Colombe, a lad of the quarter had the idea of looking in the sewer-pipe. Waiting till Colombe had gone away, he peeped into the round iron interior. Sure enough at the far end, covered by a heap of rags, he saw the gleam of a golden tress.

There were three of them at her capture. Lazare had his car stationed outside the hoarding. Crevetto and Teu Teu went with him into the vacant lot. The old woman was seated at the entrance of the sewer-pipe, eating a bowl of soup. As they approached she flung what remained on the ground.

"It's for the beast," she said. "To keep the beast from entering you must always feed him."

But the beast that entered was Lazare. Brushing the old woman aside he dragged out Casque d'Or. Colombe cried for aid, till a big hand smothered her mouth. Casque d'Or seemed too frightened to make a sound. It looked as if Big Gus would kill her there and then, had Crevetto not intervened.

"Compose yourself, Gustave. Don't let us have a drama in public."

Catching the girl's arms they dragged her to the waiting car. When she reached the boulevard she tried to scream, but Lazare was quick to close her mouth. Half a dozen passers-by looked on curiously, yet did not offer to interfere. One does not mix one's self in affairs of the kind. *Quel sale monde!*

Immediately they had her safe in the atelier and bound

hand and foot, Lazare sent word by Biftik to Sinistra. This was about two o'clock. About three the telephone rang.

"So you have the girl."

"She's here with us. What must we do?"

"Deliver her to me to-night to the Château de la Brousse in the forest of Senart.

"The Château de la Brousse?"

"Yes, six kilometres from Boissec. Take the main road and turn to the left shortly after passing the village."

"All right. I'll find it."

"Get there about eight o'clock. Good-bye."

"So that's his hang-out," said Lazare.

"What do you suppose he wants with the girl?" demanded Crevetto.

"Don't know and don't care, so long as he lets me finish with her. Well, get ready. I'll drive."

Lazare went out, leaving Crevetto alone with Casque d'Or. She was lying on one of the beds. She made no sound, but as he bent over her, her eyes were wide with terror.

"Don't fear," whispered Crevetto. "I won't let him harm you."

Lazare entered at that moment. He looked suspiciously at Crevetto.

"The car's ready. Give me a hand to carry her out."

Crevetto wanted to sit inside the car to guard the girl, but Lazare would have none of that. "No, no. She's safe enough tied that way. I'll be lonely without you, my friend."

He grinned maliciously. Every time he regarded Casque d'Or big veins stood out on his neck, his light eyes grew tigerish, and his hands opened and shut convulsively. Not for anything would Crevetto have left them together.

As Lazare carefully closed the blinds of the limousine, Biftik and Teu Teu stood by.

"You remember my instructions," said Lazare, starting the car.

"Yes," they both answered.

"Then don't fail me."

"What instructions?" asked Crevetto.

But Lazare was surly, and only replied: "Never mind. You'll know in good time."

As they drove through the forest the dusk was falling, and it was quite dark when they arrived at the château.

4

Lying on the bottom of the limousine where Lazare had thrown her, Casque d'Or strained desperately at her bonds. In her frantic fear she would have thrown herself from the rushing car; but her struggles only served to tighten the cords, and in the end she lay exhausted.

Yet in the darkness of her despair there came one gleam of hope – the whisper of Crevetto. The Italian had always treated her differently from the others. He had been considerate where Lazare was brutal. He was quiet and self-contained, with a vein of bitter irony. Often it had seemed to her that he despised the others. Now in her terror she thought of him as her only hope.

Lazare, she knew, would show her no mercy. So savagely would he maltreat her that she would never survive it. Better to die outright than to fall again into his hands.

In the darkness of the closed car she had no idea where they were taking her, but the journey seemed endless. Through a chink in the blinds she could make out the foliage of passing trees, then dusk fell, blotting everything. Soon after, they came to a standstill.

With Crevetto at her head and Lazare at her feet she was carried through the darkness. Treetops she could see, and stars and towers, and she breathed the purest of air. Then they entered a doorway and there was darkness, and the air was stale. There they put her down and left her.

A prey to the wildest terror, for a long time she lay in the dark. Far away, in what seemed another part of the house, she could hear voices. There were the voices of Lazare and Crevetto, and another strange to her. Then the voices drifted away, and there was profound silence.

At this stage it seemed to her that she must have fainted, for the next thing she was aware of was that her eyes were being tightly bound. Then she felt herself being carried once more. They seemed to be climbing stairs. Crevetto was again at her head, for suddenly she heard a low whisper in her ear: "Don't lose hope."

"Bring her this way," said that strange voice.

Now they seemed to be going along a corridor. Then she felt them turn to the right and lay her down.

"You may unfasten her," said the voice.

With his clasp-knife Crevetto quickly severed the cords. Her limbs were free.

"Place her on that chair."

She was lifted to a sitting position.

"Unbind her eyes."

A flood of light half blinded her. After so much darkness the illumination of the room seemed dazzling. It was spacious, high-ceilinged, and richly decorated. Lit by two lofty chandeliers and partially panelled in oak it had somewhat the look of a banqueting hall.

Only half consciously was she aware of the room's noble proportions, for instantly her eyes were fixed on a solitary figure. Could this be Sinistra, this man who stared at her so fixedly? He sat in a high-backed chair of old oak, leaning slightly forward. He had thick, crêpe-like hair over a forehead of unusual height; a craggy nose, grim upper lip and taut mouth; a long chin, deeply cleft. From the swarthy face black eyes glittered hawk-like. Beside him stood a masked man; but Lazare and Crevetto had retired.

"No need to ask you if you are Casque d'Or," he said.

Grimly he watched her terror, then went on: "You've been brought here by my orders, and if you are reasonable you will come to no harm. Tell me first – where is your lover?"

"My lover?"

"The young American."

"He was never my lover, and I do not know where he is."

"A bad beginning, my girl. You will have to realise your position better than that. Remember, you are in my power, and I am not accustomed to having my will disputed. Again I ask you: Where is the American?"

"I cannot tell you – and I would not if I could."

His beetling brows went down, and his long upper lip rose. The effect was singularly intimidating.

"Scum of the gutter! Do you mean to defy me?"

"I can't tell you what I don't know. When he left me last he gave me no address."

"Is there no way in which you could communicate with him?"

"I know of none. I do not know what has become of him."

Her words rang true. Sinistra studied her frowningly.

"Americans are chivalrous. As you saved his life he would

do anything in his power to save yours. I think I know an address where a note might reach him. Will you write that note?"

"To say what?"

"That you are in great danger, and that if he does not put a certain object in my hands your life will pay the forfeit. Will you write to that effect?"

"No."

"Not even to save your life?"

"No."

"Really you interest me. I never expected a little gutter-snipe to have such spirit. I should be desolated to have to break it. Do you know that I have ways of making people obey me? I do not want, however, to be obliged to resort to them. You will write this note."

"Never."

In a strange tongue Sinistra spoke to the man in the mask, who immediately disappeared.

"Well, my girl, I'm going to give you a foretaste of what is in store for you if you prove obstinate. There was a mediæval instrument of torture called the thumb-screw, of which I have devised a modern form even more effective. Alternately with the thumb-crushing process, fine needles run up under the nail. A pretty invention. Ah! you shall see. The pain is exquisite. I shall be sorry to deform those rosy nails, but. . . . Here comes my little instrument."

The masked man re-entered, carrying in his hand something that glittered.

"Admit the others," said Sinistra mildly. She heard Lazare and Crevetto enter, but paralysed with fear she could only stare at her torturer.

"Strap her."

The man with the mask flung round her two ends of a strap attached to the chair, and buckled it behind. She was a prisoner.

"Proceed, Jacob."

The man fumbled with the girl's hand. She drew a deep breath of pain.

"Will you write?"

"No."

"Another turn, Jacob."

In spite of herself a scream burst from her. Lazare was

watching with a cruel sneer. On the brow of Crevetto stood beads of sweat.

"Will you write that note?"

No answer.

"A half turn this time, Jacob," purred Sinistra.

But Crevetto stepped forward. "No, no, I can't stand it. I – I'm sick."

"You only have to leave the room," said Sinistra coldly.

For a moment Crevetto looked at them, then without a word he turned and disappeared through the curtained door.

"Continue, Jacob," said Sinistra, leaning forward to watch the effect of the torture. But this time no sound came from the girl. Her head fell forward, her eyes closed.

"Too bad. She has fainted. Well, lock her up and wait for her to come round. You can tell your squeamish comrade to come in again."

Crevetto re-entered. His face was sullen, and his eyes went to the body of Casque d'Or as she lay on the floor. Sinistra sat in frowning thought.

"Jacob," he said, after a moment, "why should I not write to the American? I will send the letter to the address of his uncle, the millionaire, Cyrus Quin. There he will be sure to receive it. We will cut off a lock of the girl's hair and enclose it. If he does not respond we will send a further note enclosing – say, one of her ears. In short, we will hold her for ransom. Yes, Jacob, if we cannot get the girl to do it I will write that letter. What he would not do for his own sake surely he will do for hers."

Then he turned to Lazare. "You can take her away for a time. Jacob will show you a place where you can lock her up. But be not too rough with her. I have use for her yet. And in an hour's time I want one of you to take a letter to Paris for me. Jacob, lock her in the cottage."

5

The masked man held open the door, and lifting the girl as before, the two others advanced. Immediately they left the room the lights went out. In the corridor, too, was darkness. All this darkness bewildered them; however, they followed Jacob closely, and came out on the landing at the

head of the grand staircase. Here it was vaguely light. Led by the silent servant they descended, crossed the hall and emerged through the front door into the grounds.

A faint moon and some stars lit their way through the shrubbery. At a distance of perhaps a hundred yards they came on a small cottage half buried by encroaching verdure. Its walls were mouldy with damp, and the door gave on a single room. The floor was littered with fallen plaster, the single window dim with cobwebs. In a corner stood a pallet bed covered with stale straw. On this they laid their burden. Then Jacob handed a rusty key to Lazare and silently went away.

"I wonder if the man's a mute," growled Lazare, staring after him. "I've never heard him utter a sound. I'd like to tear that black rag from his face and see what sort of an ugly mug he's got. Damn Sinistra! He's trying to scare us. But it doesn't go down with me. I've got a little card up my sleeve that's going to surprise him."

With a chuckle he looked at his watch. On the mantelpiece was a bit of candle which he lit. As the light fell on the unconscious Casque d'Or he gave vent to a ferocious snarl.

"*Grr! Vache!* Open your pretty eyes. There's a nice settlement awaiting you."

But Casque d'Or did not move.

"Come," he went on roughly to Crevetto; "I want to have a look at the car."

"You're not going to leave her like this?"

"Why not? What has it to do with you? She's my girl to do what I please with."

"Look here, Lazare, Sinistra doesn't want her harmed. You can't control yourself. Give me the key."

"Give you the key! No fear. And what good would it be to you? You're going back to Paris in a few minutes to deliver a letter for Sinistra."

"He said *one* of us should go."

"Aye, and that one's going to be you. I've already driven all I've a mind to. And while you're away I'll take good care of this bit of goods. She'll be damaged goods when you see her next – but what has that got to do with you?"

Lazare was forcing a fight. For some time back he had sensed in the Italian a rival, and now was the moment to

settle the business. What chance had this skinny Dago against his weight and brawn?

After a long pause, Crevetto said quietly: "I'll not go, Gustave, and leave that girl at your mercy. Again I ask you, give me the key."

The answer of Lazare was to fling it on the stone floor. It rang loudly and lay between them.

"There's the key. Try to take it. I know your game, my friend. You would escape with her, cheat me of my vengeance. You love her. But my hate is stronger than your love. *You* will go back to Paris. Ha! Your face is white. You tremble. Your fear of me is stronger than your passion for her. Go to the car. Leave me with your adored one."

Lazare pointed to the door, yet Crevetto did not budge. He trembled, but not with fear. His face had grown livid, his eyes venomous.

"Good," he said quietly. "We'll fight to see who goes to Paris. Draw, Lazare. Knife to knife we'll fight for the life of this girl."

6

There by the guttering candlelight they circled warily. Their knives were held daggerwise in their right hands, their coats wound round their left arms. Darting in, the Italian dealt deadly blows which Lazare warded with difficulty. Crouching low, snarling like two beasts, they struck at one another. Feinting, thrusting, leaping back like cats, they battled after the manner of their kind.

Lazare had the activity of the ex-wrestler, and knife-play was no new game to him. Nevertheless, Crevetto managed to slash him twice, flesh wounds that only served to infuriate him. Several times he tried to corner his opponent; but the Italian was as slippery as an eel, and with a twist had darted out of reach. After a few minutes they both paused, panting.

Lazare was bleeding from the thigh and the shoulder. But he grinned with the joy of battle, and his eyes had a tigerish glare. Raising his hand to wipe the sweat from his brow he smudged his face with blood, and the sight of it maddened him. He would finish this quickly. He would rush in and close. This time it would be body to body, blade to blade. Stark, bloody stabbing. He crouched for the spring.

Crevetto saw his intention. If Lazare chose to force it, they were bound to come together. He knew that at close quarters he would have no chance, so he decided on a desperate move. Swinging back his arm with the peculiar twirl of the Sicilian knife-thrower, he launched his weapon at the throat of his opponent. Swift and sure it flew to the mark, but even as it left his hand Lazare had ducked. The knife quivered in the wall above his head and with a roar Big Gus was on his man.

A moment later Casque d'Or opened her eyes and this was what she saw:

Crevetto was on the floor. Sitting astride him was Lazare. With one hand he clutched the Italian's throat, and with the other again and again he plunged his knife into the side of the fallen man. He grunted with every stab, and his knife streamed afresh. Then he raised his head, and she saw his bestial face grinning in a smear of scarlet.

"A-ha!" he yelled, "I've settled with your friend. And now – now it's your turn."

Rising, he threw away his knife, and advanced on her with clutching hands.

7

Cowering on the bed, she put up her arms and hid her face as behind a barrier. Breathing desperately she awaited the grip of those brutal hands. And she prayed that she might die before they touched her.

But they did not touch her; for just as they were about to close a shadow darkened the doorway.

"Stop, you dog!"

Lazare swung round. It was Sinistra, and behind him the masked man.

"What would you do?" said Sinistra. "Did I not tell you I did not want her harmed?"

"She belongs to me."

"When I have done with her. What is the matter with your comrade?"

"We had a falling out, and he – died."

"Ah! So now there is only you to take my message to Paris. Will you kindly do so at once? Here is the letter."

Lazare took it. He had no intention of delivering it, but it might give him a hold over this man.

"As soon as I can, *patron*. I have a little carburettor trouble."

"Hurry, then. But first give Jacob a hand to carry the girl to the house. I must see that she is shut up where you cannot get at her."

Jacob blew out the candle, and between him and Lazare they lifted the girl and returned with her to the château.

"In the library, Jacob."

They carried her up to a room off the main corridor, and laid her on a couch. Then they retired and she heard the key grate in the lock. In the darkness she lay still, too terrified to think clearly.

When Lazare had gone to tinker with his car Sinistra laughed.

"I arranged that nicely, did I not, Jacob?"

"What, master?"

"Do you suppose I didn't know they would fight when I sent them off with the girl? Why, I saw it in their faces. A pretty duel it was, too. Looking through the window of the cottage I enjoyed it."

He thought for a little, stroking his chin.

"Now we've got rid of one of those fellows there remains the other. Go and ask him, my good Jacob, to start at once, and to return immediately he has delivered my note. Promise him he shall have a *rich reward*, but only if he hastens."

"A rich reward. Yes, master."

"And now I must write to a certain great person whom you know, and tell him the end is in sight. Soon, I am convinced, we will have all we seek. For a time I shall be busy in my bureau; meanwhile I hold you responsible for the girl.

"And, Jacob," he added thoughtfully; "perhaps you had better light the furnace in the incineration chamber."

CHAPTER VII

RESCUE

AGHAST under the light in the corridor, Julot and I stared at one another.

"Casque d'Or!" I echoed faintly. "It can't be."

"I'll swear it. She was lying on the floor, either unconscious or – dead. I could see her face ever so plain. Lazare was there, too. I could not see Sinistra, but there was a man with a mask."

"Good God! What does it mean? We must get her out of their hands, and quick – quick."

"Yes, but how? If I could get into that room, I'd hold them up at the point of a pistol; risk everything to save her. Come, we must find a way. There's a door at the end of this corridor. Let's try that."

Alas! this door seemed to be bolted on the other side. No persuasion would induce it to yield. Nothing but to force it or find some other way. While we were hesitating, the light of the ventilator went out and the voices ceased.

"Do you suppose she's still there?" I asked anxiously.

"How do I know!" he snapped. "I can't see through walls. Instead of wasting time here we'd better get to the ground floor again, and try to reach that room by another way."

Once more we descended the stairs, and, creeping along the narrow passage, we arrived at the main hall. Here again we halted. We were considering the risk of climbing the grand staircase when we heard someone descending it. Soft feet were sounding on the uncarpeted oak. Swiftly we retreated into the little hallway at the back. To the right of this led the stairs to the cellars; to the left ran the long passage we had just traversed. As we hesitated which to take we heard these same steps approaching the door through which we had passed. In another moment we would be discovered.

To my mind there was but one course of action – leap on whoever it was and silence him. But the struggle could hardly be silent, and whatever happened we must not betray our

presence. Nevertheless, I was tensing myself for a spring when Julot pulled me back. A door just behind him had yielded to his hand, and he dragged me into what seemed to be a large cupboard. There we crouched down, while beyond the edge of the door, which we had not been able to close entirely, we saw appear a dark figure carrying a lantern.

Then we heard a muttered exclamation, and the light came towards us. For a moment I thought we had been discovered, but the man contented himself with closing the door of the cupboard. He was going away, when, as if by an afterthought, he turned a key in the lock. Then, again muttering, we heard him descending the stairs to the cellars. Had he seen us and made us prisoners? Was our presence in the château already known and some appalling fate in store for us? These questions were in my mind, but I had no comfort from Julot. He was cursing viciously, seemed to be in a violent rage.

"Looks as if we were trapped," I ventured.

"Trapped nothing! That fellow never saw us. He had a gun, and if he'd suspected we were in here he'd have pulled on us. No, I'll soon get out. It's the waste of time! Heaven knows what's happening to Casque d'Or while we're penned up like this."

He took out a little screwdriver and began on the door. As he worked he never ceased to listen. Twice he was interrupted, once by the man with the lantern, once by footsteps in the main hall. Finally, with me holding the light, he managed to unscrew the entire lock.

"Good job!" he muttered. "The air was beginning to get a bit thick. Well, we're free once more, and we won't let them lock us in any more cupboards. And now we'll move more boldly, but God help anyone who tries to stop us."

Cat-footed we crept up the grand staircase to the first landing, then along the corridor to the right. We tiptoed our way till we came to a door beneath which we could see a ribbon of light. I had the impression that it was the room in which I had first met Sinistra. If so, the man must be in there. I held my breath as we passed, and Julot also seemed alive to the danger. But we went so cautiously that even a mouse could not have made less noise. Once well away from that light we moved more swiftly, till at the end of the corridor we found a door of a more elaborate order. Before it we paused.

"It must have been in this room I saw them," muttered

my companion. He turned the handle and the door opened. Julot recognised the room, but alas! there was no sign of the girl.

"She's gone," I said helplessly.

"You didn't expect to find her still here," he snapped. "In a room with the door unlocked. What a very naïve young man! Really, at times you make me marvel. But, by God! we'll find her yet."

As he turned back along the corridor he gritted his teeth savagely. We tried two doors, but each was locked. Then we came to one directly opposite to that from which the light filtered. Locked, also.

Julot looked at the door. I who held the torch saw that his eyes glittered dangerously. His hand went to his hip-pocket, and he pointed towards the lighted room.

"I'm going in there. I'm going to make him give her up with a gun against his *gueule*. We'll see who's the better man."

For the moment passion seemed to have driven him desperate. He was darting for the door when I held him back.

"It's surely locked," I protested. "D'you think Sinistra would be in there without locking the door? You'll betray us all."

He halted, wiping away the sweat from his brow. I marvelled at his emotion. For a moment we stood irresolute, then we both started. For from the room whose door we had just tried came a low moan.

"She's in there," I faltered.

Again we heard it. At the sound Julot seemed to get his wits back. From an inner pocket he brought out a skeleton key and softly tried it. No result. He tried a second. Again in vain. He took the last of the three he always carried. The lock turned. We were inside.

Softly we closed the door after us. We found ourselves in a tall room panelled in oak. Then our light rested on a divan at its far end, and there to our joy we beheld Casque d'Or. The torch-ray rested on her heap of shining hair, but her face was hidden.

"It's us, Casque d'Or; Julot and Harlequin."

She looked up, her eyes strained and wild. As she recognised us she clutched at us frantically.

"Hush! Make no noise. We've come to rescue you."

With desperate strength she was holding on to us, and it took a few minutes before we could make her realise the situation.

"Come, Casque d'Or. Try to control yourself. You must do exactly as we tell you or we'll all be lost. But above everything, not a sound. Can you walk?"

"Yes, I'm not hurt."

"Then go between us. The sooner we get away from here the better."

Julot was leading. His idea was to slip quietly down the stairway and escape by the front door. Once in the grounds we would defy them.

So we crept ever so softly to the door, and Julot was about to open it when he stopped. It was already half an inch ajar, and he dared not close it again. For the door opposite had opened. A tall figure was silhouetted against the light.

Of course the man must have heard us, was coming to investigate. What fools we had been to think we could outwit him! Now it had come – discovery, struggle, perhaps death. Hardly daring to breathe we waited. . . .

But it was curious. Sinistra did not move. Indeed, he seemed to be listening, intent, immobile, a pen in his hand. Then we too listened; for from the hall below we heard sounds of rough voices and angry protest. Then the rumble of feet, many feet. What was happening down there? And now the feet were stumbling up the grand staircase, clattering along the corridor.

As I peered over Julot's head, through that narrow opening I could see them coming. Lazare led the way, and behind him were Teu Teu, Biftik, the Sailor, Coco, and a red-headed man I did not know. Sinistra had retreated to his room, but a gleam under the door showed them which it was. Without knocking Lazare turned the handle and entered roughly, the others crowding at his heels. Every man was gripping an automatic.

What followed I could both see and hear; for the door of the lighted room stood wide open. Sinistra was sitting in front of his desk. He looked up in mild astonishment. The six of them were grouped before him, each covering him with a pistol. Yet his face showed only amusement. He laid down his pen, and, resting his elbows on the desk, regarded them over his finger-tips. After a moment he addressed Lazare.

"My dear fellow, where did you find such a bunch of beauties? Truly if you had picked over the entire rogues' gallery you couldn't have made a more famous selection. And I see enough guns pointed at me to furnish a small arsenal. To what am I indebted for this surprise party?"

"Enough of your gab," snarled Lazare. "We're on to you at last. We've tried many times to track you to your hiding-place, but we've got you now. And now we're going to know your real name and all about you. I'm not saying we won't keep our mouths shut if you do the decent thing——"

He paused, looking round at the others. "That's right, ain't it, boys?"

"That's right, Gus," from five throats more or less husky with alcohol.

Sinistra looked at them thoughtfully. "How much?" he said.

"That million. We didn't do the job, but we earned it all the same. You hand over the million and we'll go away quietly."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then we'll fill your yellow hide with metal."

"I see. I haven't much of a chance against so many, have I? And suppose I haven't got the million here?"

"You lie! You have. You were to pay it over to us the moment we delivered the American."

"I did not say I did not have it. As a matter of fact, it's in this desk."

Lazare's eyes became avid. He had made a wild shot and hit the mark. Eager greed wreathed the faces of his companions.

"Yes," said Sinistra blandly, "here's your million."

From some secret place within his desk he took a thick bundle and laid it in front of him. The eyes of Lazare gleamed wolfishly. From his comrades came a gasp that was almost a sigh.

"It's all here, friend Lazare. Ten bundles of a hundred thousand each. Will you kindly step forward and count them for yourself."

Lazare's hands were trembling. He could not believe his luck. Putting away his automatic, he eyed that precious bundle. Never before had he seen so much money. Of course, it might be false, but he knew good money from bad. He

would count it, pocket it and then—— Well, he had a personal account to settle with this smooth crook. Ah! the insults he had been obliged to stomach. He would smash this fellow about a bit, leave a few marks on him, recover Casque d'Or and get away. At least half of that million would be his. He might even fix it up with Teu Teu to eliminate the others on the road in . . .

Such, I imagined, were the thoughts of Lazare as I saw him there in the strong light, stepping forward to grab that million.

"Keep him covered, boys, while I count."

Their eyes on Lazare, the five nodded. One step he took forward – two – a third and the money would be in his hand. Then something extraordinary happened. *He just disappeared.* Right before their eyes he vanished. Where he had been was a gaping hole in the floor. Without so much as a cry he had shot down into darkness. Bewildered, irresolute, they listened for a sound from him. All they heard was a hollow rumble, a bang, then one loud shriek. One only.

Aghast they looked at Sinistra, who was now smiling as if he visioned a scene that gave him a delicate pleasure. At the same moment the masked man entered.

"Ah, Jacob, the furnace was hot, was it not?"

"White hot, master."

"Then by now our friend Gustavus is charred and cracking open. Close the trap, Jacob, or we'll be getting some of the fumes. Roast Lazare! No, thank you. . . . And now, you fellows, I regret to deprive you of your leader; but he was insolent, and that is something I stand from no man. If you are civil and do as I bid, you will be rewarded. You shall have this million divided among you, if you serve me well. True, you can shoot me and take it, but I wouldn't advise that. Jacob, who has now retired from the room, is a bit of a wizard, and there would be painful surprises for you before you got out of this establishment. Be advised, then, and do nothing rash."

Almost paternally he looked at them over his finger-tips. About his lips played a smile of sarcastic sweetness. But he need not have warned them. They were unnerved, dismayed. All they wanted was to get out of the place alive. It was Teu Teu who recovered first.

"It's all right, *patron*," he said in his hoarse voice, "we're

straight guys. All we ask is a fair job and fat pay. We'll do anything you want."

"Good! You accept me for a leader in place of Lazare?"

"You've said it, *patron*."

"You'll find me a generous master, but deadly if you cross me. The first thing I demand is that not one of you breathe a word about this place. If you do, you will come to a disagreeable end."

"We're used to keeping our mouths shut, *patron*."

"To tell would really avail you nothing. Now, I want you to renew your search for the American. And you, friend Teu Teu, I want you to deliver a note for me."

"Right, *patron*."

He was stepping forward when Sinistra said sharply: "Back there! You don't want to go after Gustave, do you?"

The backspring Teu Teu made was a credit to his agility. He landed almost on top of the others, and all four regarded the floor with horror.

"All right. I'll finish the note."

Sinistra took up his pen and wrote rapidly. Then he folded the paper, put it into an envelope, and sealed it.

"There!" he said, and handed it to Teu Teu. But before the man could take it there was a cry, and Jacob burst into the room.

"Master!" he gasped, "the girl's gone."

CHAPTER VIII

THE FIGHT IN THE TORTURE-ROOM

1

When Jacob happened to find the door of the library open we were making for a small stairway at the far end of the corridor. It was most unfortunate for us. If he had only come along a few minutes later we should probably have got away unobserved. As it was, we had just reached the head of this stairway when, looking back, we saw Sinistra rush from his room. He switched on the light in the library, and stood in the doorway.

"Escaped!" he exploded. "How is this, Jacob? I told you to guard her."

"I don't understand it, master. It must have been while I was occupied with the furnace. I thought I locked her in safely."

"You only thought. Well, she can't have gone very far. Come, you fellows, I have work for you right away. A thousand francs to the man who first lays hands on Casque d'Or."

The five issued eagerly. Already they had forgotten Lazare and were ready to serve this new master.

"What about the outside doors, Jacob?"

"I locked them back and front and took away the keys – after these people entered."

"Hum! Thoughtful of you. However, if you locked them no better than you did that of the library it won't serve us very much. Go down and see."

Jacob ran to the main stairway, and in two minutes returned very much out of breath.

"All right, master. The doors are locked."

"Good! She's still in the château. Let the hunt begin."

As we crept down the narrow stairs we could hear the men spread out eagerly. In the chambers and corridors, in dark nooks and corners, behind screens and curtains they ferreted about. Then they crossed to the other side of the grand

stairway and searched that portion of the château. It was ill-lighted there, full of possible hiding-places, but they found no trace of the girl.

We had just gained the narrow passage below when above us we heard the voice of Jacob.

"We've hunted all this floor, master, with the exception of the two wings. But as the connecting doors are locked she could not have escaped by either."

"Curious! The wench is quicker witted than I thought. Jacob, there's more in this than seems on the surface. Well, let's search downstairs now. Isn't there a small stairway at the end of this corridor?"

"Yes, leading to a passage that runs underneath us."

"Aha! We'll descend by that. Wait! You take a couple of these jailbirds and go down by the grand staircase to the other entrance of the passage. Signor Teu Teu, will you invite three of your charming comrades to accompany us? We will take the small stairway, and you will have the privilege of leading."

By this time we were well along the passage, but we heard Teu Teu, followed by the others, rapidly descending the stairs. Arrived at the bottom, he produced a small electric torch. He had proceeded a few steps when he came to a sudden stop.

"There's someone ahead of us, *patron*."

"Forward then. We'll get her."

Crash! The burning eye of the torch went out, leaving them in darkness. A moment of astounded silence, then:

"As I thought," cried Sinistra, "there are others. Crouch and fire low."

The four men discharged their weapons. The uproar in that confined space had not subsided when there was a rush at the other end of the passage and the door was flung violently open.

"After them!" shouted Sinistra. "But hold your fire. I want them caught, not killed."

2

It was Julot who had shot out the torch, and the answering pistol-fire found us flattened on the floor. Concealment was at an end. Nothing to do but bolt for it. So, cowering low, we

ran. Even as we flung ourselves through the doorway we heard them give chase. We were in the small hall now, and from the grand hall beyond came the sound of hurrying feet. No escape that way.

"Quick!" gasped Julot. "The stairs that go to the cellars."

I led Casque d'Or by the hand, and Julot brought up the rear. We were through the doorway and descending before either party of pursuers emerged. Julot tried to secure the door after him, but it had neither lock nor bolt. Nothing for it but to keep going.

And even as we reached the bottom of the stairs we heard our hunters at our heels. Sinistra was crying: "Don't shoot. We'll corner them down below."

No time to think of where we were going, only to plunge blindly on. But if Julot dared not use his light, neither dared the others show one. They could only follow by the sound; and, tramping on each other's heels, cursing vainly, they blundered after us.

Julot had taken the lead. He kept straight on, ignoring the various side passages, each of which, he knew, ended in a *cul de sac*. Yet suddenly he checked himself, so suddenly that we almost tumbled over him.

"It should be hereabouts," he muttered.

Gropingly he advanced a few paces. "Look out for your feet. We go down now."

We had come to the spiral stairway that went to the dungeons below. Feeling our way in the darkness, we found the steps and descended rapidly. We were in the subterranean part of the original château. It was necessary to go with caution, because the passages were low and narrow. They twisted and branched, so that it was difficult to keep to the main one. I could never have done so, but Julot followed it unerringly. He could use his light now, for our pursuers were still on the floor above. Where was he making for? Ah! there in front of us was the massive door that led to the torture-room. As we entered he switched on the light, and that ghastly paraphernalia leapt into being.

Julot's face was grimly set, while his eyes had that dangerous glitter I already knew.

"Here's my chosen battle-ground," he said. "Here I'll meet them and pay off old scores. Take the girl down to the passage at the far end and wait there under shelter."

"If there's fighting to be done, old man, I'm in on it."

"Do what I tell you. Time enough to fight when you're needed. Your job's to look after the girl."

So I retreated to the small door set in the wall at the far end of the vault; descending the three steps that led to the passage below, I told the girl to wait there. For myself, I crouched on the steps, and, pistol in hand, I watched.

3

I had not long to wait. From the other side of the iron-bound door came a rush of feet, a mutter of voices; then a pause, hesitating, bewildered. The silence was broken by the cry of Sinistra.

"Forward, my braves! Remember the million! If it is those we seek it is already in your pockets."

It was Teu Teu who first ventured through the door. He came looking round cautiously, surprised he could see no one. Dashing to the shelter of a pillar, he hugged it.

"Come on, boys!" he called. "There's a door on the other side. They've taken it. Let's rush them."

But he imprudently exposed himself, and from a pillar a few yards away a Browning spat viciously. With a howl he drew back, his left shoulder torn by a ball. But it was only a flesh wound, and served to get his blood up. He blazed away at the pillar from behind which came the shot, and from the doorway the others blazed likewise. For a moment a regular hail of bullets rained on that stone barrier.

But Teu Teu did not relish his position. The column behind which he had sheltered was not quite broad enough to conceal him.

"Put out the light!" he yelled.

The red-haired man tried to do so. He reached a hand round the doorway; but instantly withdrew it as a bullet grazed his forearm. The others drew back in the shelter of the doorway. Whoever was firing from behind that pillar was a deadly shot. Again they let off a volley in that direction, but with no obvious result.

Teu Teu was feeling uncomfortable. His wounded shoulder infuriated him, and he was aware that he was unpleasantly exposed. Willingly would he have dashed back to the shelter

of the doorway, but a wholesome respect for the marksmanship of that fellow behind the pillar restrained him. He cursed impotently, calling on the others to come on; but no one dared to join him. In desperation he made up his mind to rush this unknown foe.

Lying with my head peeping over the top step, I could see the door leading to the vault, and the men huddled there. Somewhere in the background was Sinistra, but he took good care not to expose himself.

I wondered what Julot's game was. Did he want to lead them off the trail of myself and the girl? Or did he want to get a shot at Sinistra? He was puzzling them, holding them back; but he was using his shots. His clip held only six, and already three were gone. I saw Teu Teu circling round the post, and raised my weapon. But the man's back was towards me and I could not pull. It did not seem sporting. The next instant Teu Teu was hidden again, my chance gone.

Suddenly I saw the Sailor bolt out of the doorway and take shelter behind the nearest pillar. At the same moment Julot fired, but the Sailor had been so quick the shot missed. Julot's position was now dangerous. He could shelter himself from one opponent, but not from both. When he circled away from Teu Teu he exposed himself to the Sailor. And he had only two shots left. While he was evidently deciding to make a dash for a more defensive position the youth called Coco leaped for another column. Swiftly Julot fired, and this time brought down his man.

But at the same instant Teu Teu and the Sailor both blazed at him, and one of the balls ripped past his ribs. He had only one shot left. This he discharged at the Sailor, whose face he saw peeping round a pillar. Then, darting from column to column, he gained the door where the girl and I were crouching. He was followed by a perfect fusillade of shots, as, with a shout of triumph, the gang swooped down on us.

"Gimme your gun!" grunted Julot. "Mine's empty."

But this time I ignored him. "It's my show now," I said. "See to Casque d'Or. I'll face these chaps."

Looking up, I could see them coming from four directions. They were firing as they ran, and the bullets pinged on the stone close to my head. I had only time to pull twice, but I saw the Sailor crumple up. The others still came on. Running

along the passage, I half tumbled down the circular stairway and joined Julot and Casque d'Or in the tunnel below.

"Come," said Julot harshly. "We will be exposed here. They've only to shoot straight to get us. Hurry!"

But it wasn't easy. The roof was so low we had to cower down, while stones fallen from the old masonry tripped us up at every step. To make matters worse, our adversaries were now close behind.

"If they can fire, so can I," I snarled. "You go on. I'll cover the retreat."

Lying down in the bottom of the tunnel I fired into the heart of the darkness. I heard a shout, and bullets pattered all about me. A dangerous game that. I rushed to rejoin Julot, who was now a hundred feet farther on; but even as I ran the shots followed me. My pursuers were stumbling after me, blinded with rage and the lust for blood. It was a fight to the death.

When I regained the other two they had come to a standstill.

"We're at the edge of the charnel pit," panted Julot. "You hand the girl down to me."

I heard him drop; then, lowering Casque d'Or into his arms, I waited a moment and dropped after her. I fell on all fours, and for a moment was confused. I heard Julot and the girl already making their way down the cave, their feet stumbling amid the bones. I heard also the rush of the three men in the tunnel above. And I had only three shots left.

"Give me your gun now," grated a voice at my elbow. Julot had rejoined me, and grabbed the pistol from my hand. Each of the three men came blindly on. As they fell Julot fired at the sound. Then there was no more sound. Among the bones, silence, darkness. . . . Almost with horror I overtook Casque d'Or.

About fifty feet farther along we came to the tiny entrance. We had to squeeze through it, but, oh, the joy to find ourselves in the open once again! How friendly that wild place seemed. Here were stars and a tranquil moon; back there in the château, tragedy and terror.

"It's been a bloody night," said Julot as he joined us. "I wonder what became of Sinistra and the masked fellow. I only wish we'd got them, too. I think they intended to leave the other poor devils to their fate."

With some difficulty we climbed down the cliffs to the gorge below. Then Julot found the trail, and soon we had reached the forest on the other side. There was the car awaiting us.

It did not take long to swing round and head for Paris. Despite our fatigue our hearts were light. The three of us packed the car tightly. Casque d'Or slept, I slept and Julot dozed over the wheel. But fortune saved us from mishap, and in the early dawn we reached the city.

"I'm going to take this girl to a place of safety," said Julot. "What do you propose to do?"

"I want most to go back to my old room, in the Place du Pantheon," I said. "I want to sleep, sleep. I want my studio and the comfort of my bed."

"I'll drive you there," said he.

I left them with a rendezvous for the day after. I had my key in my pocket and I opened the door ever so thankfully. Thankfully too I locked it after me. As I did so I happened to glance down at the floor. There lay a letter which the concierge must have pushed under the door. Wonderingly I took it up. It was in a strange hand. Slowly I opened it. . . .

Then I stood for a moment dazed and awed. For it was the letter Mona Dale had posted on the night she met her death.

CHAPTER IX

A LETTER FROM THE DEAD

1

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I read the hurried handwriting, and, as I went on, my amazement grew. Twice I read, hardly believing my eyes. Then consternation fell on me. Stunned, stupefied with horror, I sat staring at the pages in my hand.

Here is the letter:

"My dear Harley, – I am writing to you because you are vitally interested in what I have to tell you, and because this letter may be the last I will ever write. My life is in danger. At any moment the blow may fall. If, when this reaches your hands, I am already dead, perhaps you will help to avenge me; if I am still living, perhaps together we may be able to bring to justice the greatest criminal alive.

"For at any cost we must end the career of a man who is a menace to us all. And not only to us, but to the civilised world. For by means of pestilence he would make himself master of the world. I mean that arch-enemy of society, Sinistra.

"This man, whose summons you have received, has already done infinite evil; but his crowning crime remains to be achieved. That will put him in a position of colossal power; it will also mean the loss of a million lives, the ruin of half Europe.

"Sinistra, who knows no scruples and lets nothing stand in the way of his lust for dominion, is prepared to sow broadcast the epidemic known as the Purple Pest. But to be master of the pestilence he must possess a serum that will combat and vanquish it. Such a serum has been discovered by a foreign scientist now dead. It was the intention of this old professor to put the discovery at the service

of his own country, to the exclusion of all others; but his purpose was defeated by Sinistra, who has underground channels of information. The scientist was killed, after torture had made him tell all his assassin wanted to know.

"According to the professor a sample of the serum accompanied by minute instruction for its preparation, was sealed in a silver tube and placed in his safe. On searching the safe it was found that this tube had disappeared. His secretary was suspected of taking it, but it was proved that the man had not left the premises, and a microscopic search of the place revealed nothing. However, an unknown individual was found to have been in the apartment, and to have made his escape. This man, who is still at large, is supposed to be in possession of the serum.

"Now, I know that Sinistra has searched vainly for the unknown man and has left nothing undone to discover him. I know also that he has almost completed an arrangement with the secret agents of a great power by which he will receive a fabulous sum on the delivery of this terrible force of destruction *along with its immunising agent*. For he is supposed to possess both. In the meantime the epidemic is spreading alarmingly.

"All this, Harley, you too must know, for it was you who left the professor's apartment so hurriedly. I suppose you possess the serum, though why you have not handed it over to the French authorities I cannot understand. But if you have the silver tube, you probably do not know the value of its contents. I have been nearly crazy with anxiety. What if Sinistra did you harm! What if he obtained from you the precious agent of salvation! Night and day fear has tortured me; but since the time you let me see Sinistra's note and I discovered *you* were the man, I could not get a chance to tell you. You seemed to disappear completely. And I, too, have been watched ceaselessly.

"You wonder how I come to know all this? I know because I have been under the thumb of Sinistra, because, I myself, have unwillingly furthered his designs. The very note you received was written with my typewriter, though not by my hands. It was my recognition of this that caused me to faint the day you allowed me to see it. It was then I realised you were the unknown man who had escaped with the secret serum.

"You ask again, how do I come to learn so much about Sinistra? How do I come to be in his power? Why did I not inform the police?

"I can only plead that I am a woman. I was afraid for myself, and – for one dear to me. Most important – I did not have sufficient proof. I could not have made anyone believe that this man who holds a high position in society was a great international criminal. It was too fantastic a tale even for these fantastic times. I hesitated, I temporised, I prayed for Providence to intervene. I even hoped that I, myself, might find some means to defeat him. But death threatens me, and if I do not tell now, my lips may for ever be sealed. I am slipping out to post this letter. After that, God help me.

"And now, Harley, I wish you to be prepared for a great revelation, one that will astound you beyond words.

"First: the man who goes by the name of Sinistra is no other than that evil genius of your family, your Uncle Maximus.

"Second: *the man you suppose to be your Uncle Cyrus is not Cyrus Quin at all. He, also, is your Uncle Maximus.*

"How and when the impersonation was first effected I know not. I was in America for a month, and it must have been then the change was accomplished. What became of your real Uncle Cyrus, who was one of the finest men in the world, I can only guess. But I do know that the man who sits in the chair all day is an impostor. The true Cyrus Quin has been put out of the way – killed, I fear – and Maximus Quin has assumed his character.

"It has been a plot planned and executed with great cunning, and with the aid of someone familiar with the household. When I returned from America I was completely deceived, and unconsciously I, myself, helped to further the imposture. The false Cyrus Quin knows all that the true one knew. By day he sits in his chair, a supposed cripple, directs his affairs, and poses as a great philanthropist. By night he is Sinistra, the monster who would dominate mankind.

"How I came to discover all this would take too long to tell. Bit by bit I arrived at the truth. And in the end Sinistra discovered that I knew. He caught me reading

his private papers. There was a terrible scene. He threatened me with death. In the end he put me in the position of an accomplice, though I did not then guess the terrible nature of his designs. And there was another factor in the affair which I do not wish to mention, but which made me helpless in his hands. So, for a time, while I did nothing to aid him, I helped to shield him.

"Now I have told you all. I repeat that your supposed Uncle Cyrus is really Maximus Quin. Your true Uncle Cyrus, a man with a heart of gold, has been foully murdered and a devil sits in his place. I tell you this to warn you. Do not put it down as the raving of a distracted mind, but be on your guard. Act as you think fit, and, above all, if you possess the silver tube containing the serum, or know of its whereabouts, get in touch with the French Government without delay.

"And now, Harley, in case we do not meet again, good luck, good-bye.

"God bless you and God help us all.

"Yours,

"Mona Dale."

2

For a long time I sat on the bed staring at the scrawled sheets. My first thought was of the writer. Poor Mona! How she did enjoy the dancing that night at the Poule-Cocotte! Then after a decent period of melancholy reflection, my mind passed to the letter.

Again I studied it. Some passages were vague. The meaning, for instance, of the phrase: "There is another factor in the affair which I do not wish to mention, but which made me helpless in his hands." And then again, who had written the note of warning? Who, with a knowledge of the household, had helped Sinistra to carry out his plot?

For the moment I left these questions unanswered. There were signs of hysteria in her letter, and perhaps some of her statements were a little wild.

For one thing, she assumed that I possessed the silver cylinder, or that I knew where it was. That was the very point. I hadn't it. Sinistra hadn't it. Where was it? Into whose hands had it passed? The professor had certainly put

it into the yellow safe, and Anton had found the safe empty. By what mysterious agency had the priceless serum been spirited away? *Was there another hand in all this business?*

And time was so pressing. Every day the death-roll was creeping up. Would the pest sweep France as it had devastated Poland? With a feeling of despair I half-determined to break into the professor's apartment and search for myself. Something told me that *there* lay the solution of the whole affair. Yes, there in that room below me, now dark and silent, I had a conviction I would find what I sought.

Then I tried to grasp the astounding statement that my supposed Uncle Cyrus was my Uncle Maximus. In its nature it was stupefying, yet it would account for so much. Indeed, on consideration it did not seem so very fantastic.

Maximus Quin, international adventurer! Was it so strange that he had emerged from nefarious obscurity, and conceived the idea of impersonating his invalid brother? Not a terribly difficult thing – provided he had the right accomplice. Ah! that was the question. Who could that accomplice be? Who? Of course! What a fool I was! *Weast!* Who could it be but Weast, the priceless valet, sharer of his master's secrets; Weast, the grave, the impassible. Still waters run deep. Weast was like an automaton. Even his voice was mechanical, sort of a *robot* voice. With such an exterior a man could be a prince of villains and remain unsuspected. Who knew but that Weast was the soul and centre of the plot, had conceived and executed it? For a moment in my eyes Weast became a baleful and menacing figure that overshadowed even Sinistra.

So easy, I reflected. Uncle Cyrus a recluse. Never sees anyone. Sits like a dummy on a wheel chair in a darkened room. Wrapped round in rugs, scarcely anything of him visible. By all accounts the two brothers looked alike anyway. Once Uncle Cyrus had been eliminated, how simple with the connivance of Weast for Uncle Max to play the part. A sick man. Nothing to do but keep still. Huddle in the blankets and babble about giving away millions in charity. Weast could coach him in the part. Why, even Mona on her return was deceived – for a time. What a devilish plot! And dead easy.

Yes, I saw it all. That was how Sinistra had been able to keep track of my movements, regain the lost trail. I had simply played into the man's hands. Sinistra and Weast – what a precious pair! How they must have laughed at me!

Ah! of course – Jacob, the man who never took off the mask – that was Weast. Height and build tallied.

Everything was becoming clear. When he assumed the character of Sinistra, Maximus Quin would simply spread a liquid stain on his face, to give him a swarthy tint. And that Dumas-like crop of hair carrying out the idea of a Brazilian! With that crimpy hair no one could tell it was a wig. And the teeth! those of Cyrus Quin so white and regular; those of Sinistra large and yellow – both false sets. Easy to take one out, put in the other. Change a man's whole face. So in a few minutes the bogus Uncle Cyrus became the nocturnal Sinistra.

One thing puzzled me – just when had Maximus become Cyrus? Was it my real Uncle Cyrus I had seen when I had come to demand the hand of Rosemary? The old man's emotion seemed too poignant to be mere acting. And only Cyrus Quin himself could have known what he had told me on that occasion.

Yes, that must have been Uncle Cyrus. When, then, had he been disposed of? A horror of the deed swept over me.

Then there was that interview where my uncle had again spoken of Rosemary and asked me to write to her. Had *that* been the false Cyrus? The fact that I was traced on this occasion made me inclined to think so. In that case Maximus must have discovered his brother's secret. Perhaps Weast had played the eavesdropper at the first interview.

Again there was my visit to the château. How very obvious it seemed to me now that the abduction had been a faked one! I remembered how Sinistra, sitting writing at his desk, had sent me down to see Uncle Cyrus lying unconscious in the cell. How easy it would have been to descend by some direct route, take off his disguise and impersonate the abducted man? Easy again, during the time I took a roundabout way, for him to mount to his bureau, resume his disguise, and be calmly writing at the table. And after our unexpected escape, he would simply slip back to the cell and once more play the part of the old financier. The Uncle Cyrus we had rescued was really Sinistra himself.

These were arguments that occurred to my mind, but somehow they did not satisfy me. The question: When did Cyrus Quin cease to exist and Maximus Quin step into his shoes? remained unanswered.

And puzzling over it till my head ached, I closed my eyes.

3

Profound sleep and a long rest made a new man of me, so that it was gladly I kept my appointment.

The place of meeting was a little café bar near the Madeleine. I had wondered at this choice of rendezvous, but no doubt Julot had his reasons. I had come to have a curious confidence in him. Indeed I felt inclined to tell him the whole story of Uncle Maximus, and to show him Mona Dale's letter. With a simplicity of mind that saw only essentials, he had a way of arriving at correct conclusions. His judgment was shrewd, his intuition almost uncanny. Yes, I might tell him everything and get his advice. Everything, that is, but the part that concerned Rosemary.

Julot and the girl were awaiting me on the terrace of the café. Casque d'Or was pale and quiet. She appeared to be still suffering from the strain of her experiences, but Julot seemed to have forgotten them. He smoked, twisting up his perky moustache, and his fierce black eyes were never still.

As I sat beside them, I felt a little self-conscious. I wore a cap and a rough suit that seemed out of place in such a *chic* quarter, while my two companions were equally of the *populo*. Casque d'Or wore no hat, and I question if she had ever worn one. Julot was in his sweater and black alpaca jacket. We must have made a conspicuous picture. Indeed, I noticed many eyes directed to us.

Yet how good to rest at ease with the knowledge that I was no longer hunted! For Lazare's band was now stamped out. From that quarter, at least, I had no more to fear. If I could only say the same of Sinistra!

As we were sitting there, curiously silent, Julot said abruptly: "What makes you so pensive, Harlequin?"

"I'm sad because of that fellow I shot."

"Bah! I shot four and I've never given them another thought."

Suddenly he rose, his eyes fixed on the other side of the street, where through a breach in the traffic a stoutish man was regarding us. Casque d'Or, too, was staring at him. Then

the traffic hid the man again, but when we turned Julot was gone.

"Did you see who that was?" said Casque d'Or.

"Who?"

"The Chief Inspector of the Sûreté. Let us go away."

"No, we mustn't lose Julot. And if we're being watched it won't do any good to run."

So we waited uncomfortably, afraid to move. A few days ago it was the band of Lazare we were evading; now, it seemed, it was the police.

As I sat there, my eyes rested on my companion. They lingered longest on her hair. Its coils seemed to ensnare the sunshine. There were disturbing gleams almost silvery, and rich glows as of ripened wheat. Its charm was in its brightness, and in its unstinted wealth. Little wonder they called her Casque d'Or. Men stared at it admiringly; women gazed with envy. Not in all Paris was there hair more wonderful.

Then my regard went to her face. It was one of redeeming features. The strong white teeth redeemed the rather large mouth: the frank, amber-brown eyes redeemed the rather short nose. Her brows were level and well marked, her face wax-pale with a pink stain in the hollow cheeks. A *gavroche* face, with far more charm than a merely pretty one.

What would a future be liked shared with Casque d'Or? (Come to think of it, I didn't even know her real name.) I felt singularly at ease with her. It was this sense of familiarity that appealed to me. Whatever differences we had of taste and temperament might be reconciled in the warmth and affection of camaraderie. Impulse, my great weakness, suddenly upstarted in me, urging me to stake my future with this girl.

Ah! if it had not been for my memory of Rosemary! How strange that was! In spite of the revelation of Cyrus Quin I still cared for Rosemary as a lover. It horrified me, this persistence of my passion. Even now I was comparing her with Casque d'Or. Rosemary, so tall, so graceful, with her perfect features, her air of distinction. Those gentian-blue eyes full of divine wistfulness! Her musical voice and the soft oval of her face so elusive in its colouring. Yes, I loved her as I had no right to love her. Well, in time, perhaps, I would come to think of her as I ought to think of her.

"Casque d'Or," I said abruptly, "you don't want to change your mind about marrying me, do you?"

She looked up in surprise. "Why, Harlequin, you haven't a heart to give me."

"It's a bit shattered. But what's left is yours if you want it."

"Thanks. I want a whole one or none at all. No, I don't think I'll marry you, Harlequin; but I may marry someone else."

I was glad and sorry at the same time. She went on:

"Julot has asked me to be his wife. I told him I would not unless he went straight. If he earned an honest living I said I'd consider it."

"And will he?"

"He said *he'd* consider it. I told him he ought to offer his services to the police. He would be invaluable to them. He said he didn't know if they would overlook his previous record. Have you any idea what his record is?"

"Not the slightest. Julot is still a mystery to me."

"Well, I'll never have anything to do with him as long as he is of the underworld."

"But if he changes you'll marry him?"

"I might. After all, one can marry on affection. Things arrange themselves. I think I could be happy enough with Julot. Children would help. You know, Harlequin, we can't all have everything we want, and many of us have to content ourselves with the next best thing. If Julot would only sweep chimneys or wheel a barrow I'd say 'yes.' It won't be like gipsying in Spain, but——"

With a sad little smile she shrugged her shoulders. I looked pensively at the steps of the Madeleine across the way. From the pillared porch a bridal party was coming. A girl in shimmering white crowned with orange blossoms; a man in correct black with a top-hat. Surrounded by friends they descended to the waiting limousine. Then my gaze went past the glimmering radiance of the bride to a girl who stood in the background. She was tall and wore a mantle of sables. She leaned on the arm of a slender, elderly man as slowly they came down the steps.

Now they had crossed the boulevard and were on the pavement only a few yards away. My eyes were riveted on them, my heart beating wildly. No longer could I be mistaken. It

was Rosemary and the Count de Florac and they were coming directly towards us. I bent my head as I sat before that cheap bar, trying to hide my face under the rim of my *casquette*. De Florac was perfectly groomed, the elderly beau with his monocle and his air of arrogance. As he looked at Rosemary his manner was distinctly possessive.

And Rosemary! All I could tell was that she was very pale, dressed in deep black, very unhappy looking. How I hoped she would pass without seeing me! She would have, I think; but the shining tresses of Casque d'Or caught her eye.

"Look!" she said to de Florac. "Did you ever see more beautiful hair?"

"Never outside a coiffeur's. I don't suppose it's natural. Do you?"

"Yes. How lovely." Then somehow her gaze went to me, and her eyes widened incredulously. "Harley!" she faltered.

She had grown very white. I rose, took a step forward, but de Florac checked me with a gesture. His face was bitterly hostile, the face of one who defends his own. Rosemary's eyes had closed and she seemed about to faint. For a moment we stood thus.

Then de Florac waved to a taxi and aided the girl to enter. Unable to say a word I watched them drive away.

Casque d'Or was staring up at me. "Who is it? She was so beautiful and looked so sad."

"Yes. She's beautiful – and sad. I'll explain again, but——" A check in the traffic was holding up the taxi they had taken. "Will you excuse me, Casque d'Or? I hate to leave you alone, but I must speak to them."

"Yes, go. I'll wait here for Julot."

I leaped into the first taxi. "Follow that one," I said, pointing. "You'll have double fare and a big *pourboire*."

The chauffeur nodded curtly. After all, it was no business of his.

CHAPTER X

DE FLORAC EXPLAINS

1

I saw the taxi stop in front of the Hotel Splendide, and the count and Rosemary mount the steps. De Florac was supporting the girl. A flunkey was throwing open the door when Rosemary turned and saw me. She made a movement as if to go down to me when the count checked her.

I was hurrying forward but at the foot of the steps I halted. Under the eyes of two gorgeous lackeys I realised what a disreputable figure I cut. Already the fellows were advancing as if to warn me away, when de Florac interposed. Telling Rosemary to go inside he swiftly descended the steps.

"What do you want?" he demanded hotly.

Angry in my turn I answered: "I want to speak to Rosemary."

"She desires to see no more of you."

"I'll believe that when I hear it from herself. I ask you to call her."

"And I refuse."

"Then I'll go to her."

But the count barred my way. "You'll not, sir. Even if I have to use force I'll prevent you."

"But you have no right to prevent me."

"I have. Every right."

"Indeed! What is Rosemary to you?"

"She is – everything to me."

"I do not understand."

"I do not think it is necessary you should."

What lay behind his words? I stared at this elegant man of the world whose steel-grey eyes regarded me so scornfully. But mingled with my rising rage was a cold fear. I forced myself to be calm.

"Can you not give me an interview, monsieur? I might be able to explain much that seems strange to her – and to you."

He considered me almost contemptuously. "I suppose I must. Will this afternoon suit you, here at three o'clock?"

"You may count on me."

"Very well, monsieur." Then he added: "And, of course, you will be properly dressed."

I glared at him, as with something of a sneer and a shrug he turned away.

2

As quickly as possible I got back to the Rue Royale, but Casque d'Or was no longer at the small café. That was too bad. I had lost track of both her and Julot. Heaven knew where I could find them again. At a loss, I decided to go home, wash, dress, and rest a few hours.

Leaping up six flights of stairs left me a little breathless. I was fumbling for my key, when to my amazement I heard someone in the apartment. Inserting the key in the lock very softly, I entered and tiptoed upstairs to the studio. A man with his back to me straightened up suddenly, then turned with an apologetic air.

"Weast!"

"Yes, Mister Harley. Finding the door open, I imagined you'd just gone out for a moment, so I ventured to come in and wait."

The impudence of the man! He was quite cool and composed, his face expressionless. Yet I knew that a moment ago he had been searching my room. Well, my best plan was to act innocence.

"Quite right, Weast. Glad you waited. Uncle keeping well?"

"No, sir. I'm sorry to say the master is in a very bad way indeed. It was about that I came. He's had another stroke. He can't move his right arm at all now, sir. He has an idea that the next stroke will finish him, and he'd like to see you again."

I hesitated. Would it be safe? If only I could ask Julot's advice! Well, I would promise to go, and I would make it as late as possible, so as to give me time to find my friend.

"I'll come, but I fear I shall be detained. I have a dinner engagement."

"That will do nicely," said Weast with eagerness. "Even if it's after ten, sir, don't hesitate to come. Master's particularly wakeful in the evenings."

"Righto!"

"There's another thing, Mister Harley."

"Speak up."

"It's about Miss Rosemary. She's come to Paris with the Count de Florac, him that was the friend of Madame Mercier. They are staying at the Splendide. Knowing the reputation of the count, your uncle is anxious. He would be glad if you could see her, and persuade her to accompany you this evening. He would like to meet her once again."

"You mean that when I come this evening he would like me to bring Miss Rosemary with me?"

"Precisely, sir. He says he has something very important to say to you both. And it may be a kind of good-bye, sir."

"I understand," I said gravely. "If possible we'll both come."

How I longed to take this smooth villain by the throat and throttle him! What kind of a trap was he setting for me? And to look at his respectful face it was so hard to believe that the man was such a consummate rascal. Yet was he? After all, I had only been theorising. Perhaps Weast was an unwitting tool in my uncle's hands. As I watched the valet go quietly away I had a feeling of doubt.

But what of Rosemary and de Florac? Was there anything in what the man had suggested? I remembered de Florac's possessive manner, and Rosemary's air of compliance. What was between them? The count had always shown great affection for the girl. I had never quite liked it, though it seemed innocent enough. De Florac might be an old satyr. That he had been the lover of Madame Mercier was common report. Of course, he could not have conceived the idea of seducing the niece. That was unthinkable. But de Florac might want to marry Rosemary – perhaps was already married to her. This thought came to me devastatingly. For a long time I sat turning it over in my mind. Well, pretty soon I would know the truth, and if de Florac was acting the scoundrel, God help him!

"I've already killed a man," I thought bitterly. "Another won't make much difference."

3

I was aroused out of these reflections by a knock at my door. To my great joy I saw that it was Julot.

"I thought I'd find you here. Casque d'Or and I waited, but you did not return, so I saw her to my mother's again. I suppose she told you."

"All kinds of congratulations. I'm terribly glad."

"That's good of you. I thought you might want her yourself, and what chance would I have against such a *beau gars*? How she can bring herself to marry an ugly little devil like me I can't understand. I've promised to try to get a job with the police. Inspector Jean Dulac is going to put in a good word for me."

"I can't imagine you as an agent of the Sûreté."

"A fat little bourgeois with a missis and a *gosse*! You'll come and share our Sunday *poulet* sometimes?"

"I hope so. But there are other things. I want your advice."

"I know you do."

"Why?"

"Because you always will. You're a blundering young fellow, for ever getting yourself into some kind of trouble, and you need your Uncle Julot to help you out."

I ignored his derisive patronage. "What did you do with the crimson *carnet*?" I asked.

"I handed it over to Doctor Hetz – after making a copy of it."

"And what about the silver cylinder?"

"What about it?"

"Where is it? Who has it? I'm sure Sinistra hasn't. And the need is so pressing. If we cannot discover it quickly, thousands of extra lives will be sacrificed."

"Millions, maybe."

"Which means we must at all hazards prevent Sinistra getting it."

"Well, the solution's simple. Kill him."

"How?"

He took an automatic from his hip-pocket. "If you can show me the man this moment I'll empty my clip into his skin."

"What if I *could* show you him?"

Julot gave a start. "Go on."

"I think I can tell you where Sinistra is at this very minute. Not only where he is, but who he is. You'll be surprised. It's quite a story, so sit down and listen."

4

Then I treated Julot to some family history. It consisted chiefly of the chequered career of my Uncle Maximus; of how Sinistra and my Uncle Max were the same man; of how I had reason to suspect that Sinistra had done away with Uncle Cyrus and was impersonating him. With a growing intensity of interest he listened. He even forgot to smoke. When I had finished he said bitterly:

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I knew of it only yesterday. That is, the part of it where Uncle Cyrus is concerned. Read that."

I handed him the letter I had received from Mona Dale. Twice he read it through, then calmly put it in his pocket.

"If I'm going to work for the police I might as well begin." he said. "I imagine Inspector Dulac will be mighty glad to get hold of this."

I was a little taken aback, but was too much in need of his help to protest.

"I trust you with it. I only wish we'd let the police take a hand in the business long ago."

I went on to tell him of the visit of Weast and the meeting arranged for the evening.

"Shall I go or not?"

He thought a moment. "If you go, no doubt you'll be putting yourself in his power. But you can shoot, and shoot quick. On the other hand, he may not be prepared to reveal himself – just yet. And if he thinks you know where the silver cylinder is, he will be more likely to pump you as your Uncle Cyrus than in any other character. He may appeal to you on account of his laboratory. In any case, I do not think he will try anything desperate this time."

Rolling a cigarette, he went on mockingly.

"It's an adventure. You're young and strong, and you're on your guard. They, on the other hand, do not dream that you even suspect them; so the cards are with you. Of course,

you have only this letter to prove that your Uncle Cyrus is really Sinistra. If you saw him you might come to a definite conclusion. I don't want to advise you, however, and I'd hate like hell to attend your funeral. No, on the whole, I say: *don't go*. . . . And now I must be off. I have a little pressing business. Where will you be about midnight tonight?"

"Here, I hope."

"Good! Take care of yourself, Harlequin. *Au revoir*."

5

Even the lackeys bowed to me, as at three o'clock I entered the Hotel Splendide and demanded to see the count. I was shown up to the salon of a private suite, and kept biting my nails a good ten minutes. As I sat there I felt a dogged determination to speak with Rosemary. Not a dozen damned Frenchmen would come between us. Then I started up. De Florac had entered by another door and was regarding me icily. He held his spare figure erect; his severe features were cold as marble, his steely eyes uncompromisingly hostile. With his hands behind his back he stood there, a living point of interrogation.

"What do you want?"

"To see Rosemary. To explain."

"I imagine you'll find it difficult to explain."

"I imagine not. You call her and let me have a chance."

"I regret that she is indisposed. Apart from that, she bids me convey the message that she has no desire to see you again."

"You're a liar!"

He started. It seemed as if he could not believe his ears. After a moment in which he seemed to control his anger, he said:

"In my young days you would have responded to that on the field of honour."

"Damn your field of honour! It's the honour of Rosemary I'm thinking of. What are you doing here with her? Tell me that."

"I have a right to be here with her."

"What right? You're not married to her, are you?"

He looked amazement. "Certainly not."

"Then what the devil——! You're compromising her, travelling around with her and all that. A girl young enough to be your daughter."

"It's because of that I may protect her."

"Protect! I know what protection means with your sort. Say, I'm going to have this business ironed out right here. I demand you call Rosemary and let me have a few minutes' talk with her."

"And I refuse."

"Good God! One would think you had a real right in the matter."

"I have. And Rosemary recognises it."

"And what? I ask again."

"And again I refuse to explain."

"You refuse! She's in there. I'm going to see her."

"You shall not pass, sir."

For a moment we confronted one another. I could have knocked him down with a blow, but there was a gleam in his eyes that suggested weapons more deadly than fists.

"Look here, Count," I said more calmly; "I don't want to make a scene, but I've got to see her. I don't know where you come in at all. You have nothing to do with us, with the family. Being the friend of her aunt doesn't give you any right over her. Will you take a message and tell her I wish to see her, if it's only for a minute?"

"In my presence, then."

"Damn it, no, sir! I don't recognise you in this at all. I don't know what you mean when you talk about rights. But I, I have my rights, and I mean to claim them."

"And what are they, may I ask?"

"Well, I didn't mean to let it out till I'd seen her. It's family history – nothing to do with you or anyone else. But I suppose it will have to be told eventually. To my own hurt I've kept it secret too long. Listen, Count de Florac. You're going to get the surprise of your life. . . . You suppose it's my cousin Rosemary I'm asking to see, the daughter of my Uncle Cyrus. Well, it's not. Rosemary is no more Cyrus Quin's daughter than she is – say, yours. My father (I say it with shame) was the lover of Rosemary's mother. *Rosemary is my sister.*"

6

At my last words the face of de Florac was a study in emotion.

"Your sister!" he echoed. "Good God! man, you're crazy."

But I went on doggedly: "There's no use blinking the fact. Rosemary and I had the same father. It's tough on us, for we loved each other in quite another way. I wanted to marry her, then I found out that instead of being cousins we were half-brother and sister."

"And who told you this?"

"Uncle Cyrus."

"And did you simply accept the statement without any sort of proof?"

"What proof could one ask to support such a statement? A man isn't going to blacken his own name."

"Isn't he? I wonder? What did Cyrus Quin tell you?"

"That his wife was my father's mistress."

"It's a lie – a black lie."

I stared. The count's eyes were ablaze with wrath. He was pacing up and down, his face twitching.

"Your father was never her lover. Never!"

"I'm mighty glad to take your word for it," I said humbly.

Abruptly he paused, making an apparent effort to be calm.

"Sit down. There's something I want to say to you."

I subsided into an easy chair, my eyes glued on the count.

"On that subject I have a statement to make. First, let me assure you, you have been deceived."

"I'm glad. I hated to think my dad was that sort."

"Hated to think! Why, it would have been a glorious privilege. But I forget. You Americans do not look at things in the same way. She was a very beautiful woman, and she detested her husband. It would have been strange if she had not accepted the sympathy and comfort of another."

"Do you tell me she hated Uncle?"

"Loathed him. To begin with, by temperament they were quite unsuited. He was wrapped up in his business. While, on the one hand, he worshipped her, he neglected her on the other. She would live only in Europe, and he could go over there only every six months or so. She loved society, gay, witty people. Like all beautiful women, she was spoiled. It would have been strange if she had remained faithful to a

man of another race, absent nearly all the time, and with whom she had nothing in common. It would have been extraordinary if she had not taken a lover. Well, she did take one, but it was not your father. I knew your father – a big, simple-hearted man."

"Then why on her death-bed did she tell Uncle it was my father?"

"Did she? Again I wonder. We have only the word of Cyrus Quin for that. And if she said so, it was to shield another man. If she did blame your father, it was to save a man she loved from ruin. That man is the real father of Rosemary."

"Who is this man?" I ventured, after a silence.

"*I am*," said the Count de Florac, and there was pride and defiance in his face. "I had the honour of a beautiful woman's friendship, then her intimate confidence, then her tenderest trust. Ours was a great love. Its very exaltation redeemed it. And of it Rosemary is the fruit. She is my daughter, mine! I never could claim her, but I kept close to her. Her aunt knew the whole story and sympathised with me. I posed as the friend of the family; but all the time, knowing she was my daughter, my heart yearned for her. Well, that is ended. Now I intend to adopt her legally. She shall be Rose Marie de Florac."

"Does she know?"

"Of course. She has suffered so much, poor child! The neglect of her supposed father, your apparent abandonment of her, the death of her aunt——"

"Is Madame Mercier dead?" I said, surprised.

"About ten days ago. Rosemary's in mourning."

"What does she think of me?" I ventured to ask after a long pause.

"First, she supposed that your uncle had refused his consent to the marriage. Then, as she heard nothing from you, she thought something had happened to you. It was her aunt who suggested you had forgotten her. You know, you have a reputation for instability. But Rosemary has never ceased to believe in you. Nothing we could say could change her. There was a time when she wanted to become a nun, but I think she's gotten over it. Ah! she's been ill, broken-hearted. You're lucky to have someone who cares for you like that."

"I know. I've never ceased to think of her, but – so many things have happened, are still happening. I'll explain to you

both. And now, as her father, may I ask if you object to me as a son-in-law?"

With a whimsical smile, he shrugged his shoulders.

"What good to object? I fear she has absorbed enough of the American spirit to take things into her own hands; and, if I refused my consent, you yourself would do without it. However, my first desire will always be for her happiness."

"Thank you, sir. And now – may I see her?"

"I expect she is waiting with the greatest anxiety the result of this interview. If she is able to stand the strain, I will send her to you."

He left me. How endless the minutes seemed as I waited! Joy flamed in me. Ecstasy whirled me to the heights. Then the door opened:

"Rosemary!"

"Harley!"

As I have little taste for depicting scenes of sentiment, the ten minutes that followed will remain undescribed. But let us suppose that we merely sat and gazed at each other, dazed with the wonder of the divine miracle that had reunited us. Then a discreet tap at the door. Enter de Florac.

A remarkable change had come over him. In a few minutes he seemed to have become human, genial, sympathetic. Tenderly he patted Rosemary on the shoulder.

"Come, my dear. I don't want you to be too tired for this evening. I'm inviting Harley to dine with us – that, is, unless he has something better to do."

"Can you?" she asked eagerly.

"Can a duck swim?"

"Good-bye then, till this evening." She held out her hand, which I kissed. De Florac looked after her fondly.

"I should really hate you, young man. You'll be taking her away from me one of these days."

"Sorry, sir – for you."

"Oh, as long as she's happy, I'll be happy. I've seen so much sadness. And now sit down. Let's have an account of yourself since I saw you last."

7

During a recital of my adventures, which lasted over an hour, and was only sketchy at that, the Count de Florac

listened with the greatest intentness. He kept his eyes fixed on me, a frown between his brows. From time to time he uttered a sharp exclamation. What excited him most was the attempt to sow broadcast the Purple Pest. When I had finished, he sat for some time in deep thought. Then he said:

"From what you tell me, it seems evident that this man who calls himself Sinistra has been unable to find the cylinder, containing the serum. If he still thinks you have it, and that you mean to hand it over to the French Government, your life is in serious danger."

"I haven't got it. I wish I had."

"So do I. It must be found. But to return to Sinistra. Do you suppose he was telling you the truth when he told you he was your Uncle Maximus?"

"Why not? How would he know anything about Uncle Max otherwise? It's a family secret."

"He might have known him in the past and discovered his history. Being the brother of a very rich man, there were possibilities of exploitation."

"But the resemblance?"

"True. It's hard to get over that. What I wanted to suggest, however, is that there is always room for doubt – that really he might be a clever impostor. Let us grant, though, that Sinistra and your Uncle Max are one. The next question that confronts us is: Can we prove that Sinistra is really impersonating your Uncle Cyrus?"

"Haven't we Mona Dale's letter?"

"Before you received that letter the idea of such a thing never entered your head. Now I don't mean to cast any doubt on her disclosure. I think it is highly probable."

"What's the point, then?"

"The point is that, once having gained that place, he is impregnable. We can prove nothing. A supposed invalid, he sits in his chair in a darkened room, guarded by his valet; he speaks little, his face downcast, dark glasses hiding his eyes. Rich, powerful, honoured, how could we go before such a man and accuse him of being Sinistra, the international bandit? He would call in the police, and we would be arrested as raving madmen. You see our weakness. As far as the world is concerned, the lonely man of the Villa Cæsar *is* Cyrus Quin, and always will be. I have some influence with the

Government, but I never could convince them that the great international financier in their midst was an impostor. Even by my closest colleagues I should be regarded as a lunatic. No, the only course is to trap him into confession."

"If that were possible!"

"We must try. We must make the man who sits in the wheel-chair and gazes out on the Bois admit he is not Cyrus Quin at all, but Maximus, alias Sinistra. There's the problem."

"Can you suggest a way? He asked me to come and see him this evening. I did not mean to go, but if you think it might help——"

"We might both go. I would not let you risk it alone, but the pair of us, well armed, should be safe. We'll take my limousine and leave it at the door. Under the circumstances, I do not think they would dare to molest us."

"I don't know if my uncle will admit you. He asked to see me alone. That is to say, I was to bring Rosemary if possible."

A smile curved the count's severe lips. " I have an idea. It will be dark at that hour. Rosemary has a long cape with a hood. Being of slim build and not too tall, I could put it on. In the doubtful light I might pass the scrutiny of Weast. Once inside the house, we'll find our way to the old man."

"If Weast makes a fuss, I'll put a gun to his bean."

"As a matter of fact, I have already tried to see your uncle, but he has refused me an interview. It's about Rosemary. I have to get his consent before I can adopt her. I wished to avoid all scandal, and my idea was that we could arrange the matter quietly. Of course, if Cyrus Quin were dead, it would be quite simple. But, as far as I am concerned, he is alive, and it is he I must approach. Now if I could get at him along with you, we could perhaps break down his barrier of dissimulation. After that, on our united testimony and with my influence, we could get the police to act. A medical examination, for instance, would reveal the imposture. A search of the house might disclose the body of the real Cyrus. A grilling cross-examination of the man Weast might have definite results. It is on these lines we must work. But first we must have more justification for any steps we take. We must try to trap the recluse of the Villa Cæsar."

"Then we'll try to-night."

"Settled. And now we dine here at half-past seven sharp. After dinner we'll carry out our scheme."

8

I went away with my head in the clouds. It was not of the coming interview with my uncle I thought, but of Rosemary, always Rosemary. Never in my life had I been so radiantly happy. My joy was so piercing it was almost pain. Then something sobered me. It was one of those lugubrious wagons that were conveying the victims of the Purple Pest to the cremation area.

But even that could not keep me down for long. Egotism surged in me. Curse this epidemic! Why should I let it cloud my serene sky? Why should I worry about the woes of France, the safety of humanity? What business was it all of mine? Life owed me happiness, and it lay through Rosemary. We would go away together, leave this country to its fate.

For the first time in many months I donned my dinner clothes, and the sight of myself, well-groomed and radiant reassured me. After all, I was none the worse for my misadventures. I looked more self-reliant than I did a month ago.

In the private salon we had a dinner delicately selected and exquisitely served. Under soft lights the table glittered, and behind us obsequious shadows came and went. It was a luxury I had almost forgotten, and made me realise that Rosemary was rich. She had inherited a fortune from her aunt, I learned. But it made no difference to her. She had never seemed so beautiful to me. The pallor of her recent illness was relieved by a little flush of excitement; her sensitive face was lit up with joy, and her gentian-blue eyes were divinely tender. It was a dinner of rare delight.

Of course I had to tell of my adventures, which I did with a foot on the soft pedal. Then about half-past nine the count decided that his daughter had had enough excitement for one day, and suggested bed. Immediately Rosemary had retired his manner changed.

"Now, young man, to business. I have a feeling we have some dirty work before us. Do you feel like it?"

"Lead on, Count," said I, gulping down my liqueur. "I'm game for anything now."

CHAPTER XI

UNCLE CYRUS EXPLAINS

1

It was a little after ten when we drew up at the Villa Cæsar. It looked saturnine in its isolation. From the windows not a gleam of light showed. Even the octagonal tower was defiantly dark. One would have said the place was uninhabited.

But Weast opened the door alertly enough. Happily the hall was but dimly lighted, so that the count, in his long, military cloak with the hood deeply drawn, was not clearly distinguishable. Added to which there seemed to be a curious reluctance on the part of Weast to scrutinise us too closely.

What was the matter with the man? He bent his head as if to hide profound excitement.

"You've come, Mister Harley."

His voice had a note I could not define. Triumph perhaps, or apprehension.

"Yes, how's Uncle?"

"Very poorly indeed, sir. But I've orders to show you up."

In that favouring obscurity we followed him. The deep carpet muffled our steps and about us the silence was profound. The corridor at the head of the stairs was more than sombre. As I stared at the back of the manservant I had again that queer suspicion. Could it be that this valet, who seemed without personality, was the real centre of the plot? Could it be that he was leading us into a carefully prepared trap? Yet, even as the thought startled me, we were at the door of the Star Chamber.

As we entered the room its brilliance took me by surprise. In the blue ceiling each of the seven crystal stars glowed milkily and was reflected in the long mirror. Their radiance, gentle and benign, seem to mitigate the bareness of the walls. There was no furniture of any kind. The windows that faced the Bois were heavily shuttered, and even the window-seat had disappeared. The effect was one of isolation – all sight and sound of the outer world profoundly excluded.

But the starkness of the chamber only served to focus attention on its central figure, the man in the wheel-chair. His back was towards us, and Weast approached him softly.

"They've come, sir," he said, as if rousing one who dozed. Then, with face averted, he left the room. Heavily the door closed on him; yet I had a feeling that his eyes, if not his ears, were still active.

The sight of my uncle startled me a little. The old man sagged forward in a way that suggested great weakness, and his velvet skull-cap had drooped so far over his face that only his jutting eyebrows prevented it covering his eyes. Even in sleep he wore those dark spectacles that were like ink-blots on the whiteness of his skin. What expression lay behind those black lenses I could not divine. Hate, exultation or only a senile apathy? But the face itself was expressionless. Its sagging position pouched up the flesh flabbily. Its sedentary pallor was accentuated to a fungus-white. Still, there was the strength of the jutting nose and the long, pugnacious chin. The fine-lipped mouth was twisted to the right, and a little saliva dribbled from its corner.

As I looked at the stricken figure, I felt a touch of pity. If this was acting, it was superbly done. It was hard, indeed, to believe that the decrepit invalid, wrapped in rugs and sunk in the big wheel-chair, was really my Uncle Max – the fantastic Sinistra. Well, I would watch him like a hawk, and in the scene that was about to be enacted it would be strange indeed if he did not give himself away.

"Ah, Harley, I'm mighty glad to see you," he said feebly.

"How are you, Uncle?"

"Slipping fast, my lad."

He held out his left hand. As I took it my eyes went to the other hand that lay twisted and still on the arm of the chair. He saw the look.

"Yes, half of me's dead already. Maybe it'll make it easier for the other half. The end's near and I'm glad. . . . So you've brought Rosemary. I'd like to see her once again, poor girl!"

But it was the count who stepped forward

"Not Rosemary. I came in her place."

Like an electric shock a start convulsed the figure in the chair, all but the big, palsied hand that seemed nailed down. The white face was raised a little, so that the black lenses

rested on the count, and from the twisted mouth the voice was almost the voice of Sinistra. Eagerly I watched.

"And who are you?"

"You knew me well enough in the old days."

"Ah, yes. The Count de Florac. But, sir, I have already refused to see you. Has Weast been drinking that he dared to admit you?"

"I must indeed apologise, monsieur, for what seems a brutal intrusion. But circumstances warrant it. Rosemary is not strong enough to stand the strain of what must be to her a painful interview. I came to represent her."

"And by what right, pray?"

"As her guardian."

"Self-appointed. But I refuse to recognise you as her guardian. Remember that in the eyes of the law she is still my daughter. I can have her brought here. Besides, I do not think you are the proper person to be her guardian – you who were the lover of her mother's sister."

"That is false, monsieur. I was not. But no matter. If I have no right, what about this young man here, who you declare is her brother? If anyone has a right to be her guardian, he has."

"That is exactly why I wanted him to bring her here. I wanted to confide her to his hands, to give them both my dying blessing."

There was irony in the tone, but the dull-white face was inscrutable. He continued:

"You have no right here, monsieur. I will be glad if you deprive me of the pleasure of your presence."

"Wait a moment," I broke in. "The count has a communication to make that may put things in a different light. Go on, monsieur."

A flicker as of surprise seemed to pass over the still face. Then:

"Go on."

The count stood erect before the wheel-chair. He folded his arms, squared his slim shoulders, and his metallic voice was calm.

"First of all," he began, "I may tell you I adore Rosemary. I live only for her happiness. I want your consent to adopt her."

"I will never give it to you."

"You are prejudiced. Whatever have been my past sins, I am now old and regenerate. And, after all, you say you are dying."

The man in the chair laughed grimly. "I may take a long time to it, though. And as long as I have breath in my body, Rosemary will be considered my child. Do you think I want the world to know my shame? – That my wife was a wanton, and that the father of that boy was——" He hesitated a second, then he spat out with sudden viciousness: "Was a sneaking skunk, a low-down traitor. To be betrayed by my own brother – ugh!"

I made a movement, but the count checked me.

"A moment," he said quietly. "That was one of the reasons I came here – to right a wrong. Monsieur Quin, I have a confession to make."

I was watching my uncle. Up to this time he had played the part to perfection. Of course, it had all been acting; but Maximus Quin had so identified himself with the character of his brother that now he seemed to feel it, even to the emotion of a betrayed husband. How would he take the revelation that was coming? Would he play up to it, or would he fall down? By word or action would Sinistra reveal himself? Then would be the time to denounce him. Breathlessly I waited.

There was a long silence. The face of the paralysed man seemed to stiffen. My eyes went to his rigid arm and leg, then rested on that big hand, so grotesquely twisted.

"What do you mean?" he said at last.

"I mean that your wife deceived you in telling you that your dead brother had been her lover. He never had. I can prove that. Rosemary is not that boy's sister. She is not your brother's daughter."

"Whose, then, is she?"

Was it possible that there was in the count's voice a touch of exultation, even of malice? But, after all, was not the whole scene a farce?

"Mine," he answered.

"*Yours!*"

I was startled at the explosive energy of the tone. The left hand of the man in the chair was suddenly clenched. His head went up, so that his face lost its flabbiness, became strong, firm, fierce. Then he seemed to master himself.

"Yours! Bah! I don't believe it. You lie, you dog."

"Oh, I lie, do I?"

The Count de Florac took a step forward, and drawing a little packet of old letters from his pocket, shook them in the face of the old man.

"See these. You know her handwriting. Read these and see if I lie."

I saw that my uncle was bending forward. His eyes were riveted on the packet of letters, and his face had become hard and menacing. It was the face of my Uncle Max, the face of Sinistra.

I wondered at the count. Instead of abasing himself, he seemed to glory in what he had done. On his face was triumph, even a little contempt. It was as if he were baiting the helpless figure before him.

"These letters tell the whole story. They will convince you that Rosemary is my daughter. Your wife hated you, but she accused your dead brother to shield me. I was her lover. Between us we fooled you. I knew her as you never knew her. She gave me all, I——"

But he got no further. With the scream of a ferocious beast, the man in the chair shot out as if projected by a catapult. The next moment he was on the top of de Florac, and the right hand, supposed to be paralysed, was gripping the count's throat and smashing his head against the floor.

2

So quickly had it happened, I had no time to intervene. I saw the long stiff leg suddenly crook under the blanket, the clawlike hand come alive, the black spectacles drop from the tallowy face. The next moment a man, tense and tigerlike, was straddling the count, bent on crushing the life out of him. I sprang to the rescue. Gripping my uncle's wrists, I tried to wrench away those throttling hands. The count was already unconscious, but his head continued to pound sickeningly against the floor. Exerting all my strength, I could not force those deadly hands to release their grip. Then I struck my uncle full in the face, but still he held on. Finally I plunged my thumbs in the glaring eyeballs, and with a cry of pain he fell back.

In another moment I was on my feet, standing over the unconscious count, automatic in hand.

"You damned assassin!" I gasped. "The game's up." My uncle had risen. He was glaring and panting, the picture of thwarted fury. The long, hatchet face was twitching with hate, the black, deep-set eyes venomous. It was indeed Sinistra, but a Sinistra more terrible than any I had yet seen. Then like magic he regained his self-control, and laughed mockingly.

"You have the advantage. It was foolish of me to lose command of myself. Yet in another minute I'd have killed that man. Well, I've had enough of playing the part of a paralytic. It's too tedious. And now, my precious nephew, what do you intend to do next?"

"Shoot you. But first I'd like to know what you've done with Uncle Cyrus?"

He laughed. "You think I killed him. You're wrong. He is safe, unharmed."

"I don't believe you."

"My dear boy, you misjudge me. Whatever I am, I am not the slayer of Cyrus Quin, a great and good man, whose character I have every reason to respect. Let me tell you that your Uncle Cyrus is here in this house, alive and well."

"Produce him, then."

"Willingly, if you give me a chance. As for shooting me, my dear Harley, you know that's all a bluff. You haven't the nerve to kill a man in cold blood. So please put away that pistol and don't make yourself absurd."

"At least I can defend myself with it. And I warn you, if you make the least move, I'll use it."

"I am at your mercy. But do you mind if I call Weast? If I am to produce your Uncle Cyrus it is necessary for me to instruct him."

"Go on, then, but at the smallest sign of treachery I'll shoot."

He called sharply, and the door opened to admit Weast. The man cast a look of fear at the body of the count. He seemed as if he were under the influence of some drug.

"You may take that chair away," said Sinistra. "I do not think I will have any more need of it."

Weast wheeled round the chair and pushed it into the corridor.

"But you will return with it in a few minutes – bringing your master."

Weast looked bewildered. Slowly he backed out of the door that closed on him.

"You must not think too hardly of poor Weast," said Sinistra smilingly. "I fear I have rather intimidated him. A weak worm of a fellow. In a few minutes you will see your uncle alive and well. And what, then, do you propose to do with me?"

"If you can produce Uncle Cyrus alive and well – I'll be glad to see the last of you."

"Thank you. I realise that for the present my plans have miscarried. I will have to seek fresh fields for my activities. I am convinced at last that neither you nor I know of the whereabouts of the silver cylinder. That being so, why should I concern myself any further with you? Of course, there are blood ties. After all, I am your Uncle Maximus, am I not? I shall be sorry if we never meet again, my little nephew. I shall——"

Suddenly I became aware that he was slowly retreating, so that his back was now against the long mirror. And even as I realised it, I saw the mirror incline slightly to the left. The next instant he had disappeared. I was staring at my own reflection. I dashed forward and feverishly examined the glass. Yes, there was a thin line of space all round it. No doubt it moved on a central pivot, operated by some secret spring. Backing up against it, all he had to do was to touch the catch that released it and slip behind. A nice trick. I ran to the door and turned the handle. Locked! With a feeling of foreboding, I returned to where the count lay.

3

The latter at least showed signs of recovering. Presently he opened his eyes and stared about him.

"What happened?" he moaned.

"Sinistra acted his part a little too realistically. He went after you as if he had really been the injured husband."

"Strange! Where is he?"

"Searce me. Seems we're prisoners. Door locked. No way out of this place."

The count struggled to his feet. "We must find a way. We're both armed. The car's in the street outside. It will be strange if we cannot make our escape from a modern house in the heart of Paris."

"I wish I felt so confident," I answered. "The windows have iron shutters that slide down from above. How they work it will take time to find out. Curious thing, too, the walls are of steel coated with enamel. Looks as if we were prettily trapped."

"*You've said the word—trapped.*"

I stared at de Florac. "Did you speak?"

He stared at me in turn. "No."

"Yet the voice seemed to be in the room."

"Yes, beside us——"

"*Prettily trapped.*"

There again! I looked around quickly. But the count was pointing to an angle in the wall. Just above the tall mirror there seemed to be a long opening about an inch wide. I would not have noticed it, but that near the top I saw the white of a cheek and the gleam of an eye. I made a grab for my pistol, yet even as I did so, I heard a deafening report and the hiss of a bullet close to my head. Then I was aware that beneath the gleam of the eye was the gleam of a steel barrel. I stood transfixed.

"Don't attempt to pull a gun," said a stern voice. "Back up to the wall, both of you."

As I hesitated, there was another stunning report, and the *ping* of lead on metal. Under the circumstances it seemed foolish not to obey. The count had already realised the necessity and was flattened against the opposite wall. I followed his example, awaiting further orders.

They came. "You have guns. Throw them on the floor."

Again I hesitated. There was another shot from above, but this time it seemed as if the bullet had grazed the tip of my ear. I saw the count's hand go to his hip, and his automatic jerked to the centre of the floor. Mine promptly joined it. There was nothing to be gained by being defiant. Otherwise, who knew?

"Stand flat against the wall, your hands pressed to it. Good! If you set the value of a red cent on your lives, remain like that, both of you."

Then there was a sliding sound, and a panel about four feet

square moved back, revealing a dark recess. It was situated between the top of the mirror and the ceiling, and was about fourteen feet from the floor. Inside this recess Sinistra was kneeling. In his hand he held a Mauser pistol which was cocked at us. His hatchet face was white against the blackness. His thatched brows could not hide the ironical triumph of his eyes, and his tight lips were twisted cruelly. For a time he looked at us as if he were enjoying a hugely diverting spectacle.

And vividly I could imagine the picture we made, each sprawled against a panel of that octagon-sided room. Above us was the milky radiance of the seven stars, and in the square recess over the long mirror, the gloating Sinistra. When he spoke, his voice was sonorous, distinct, deliberate.

"My worthy nephew, do not look so amazed to see me again. Am I not fulfilling a promise I made to you? I told you I would produce your Uncle Cyrus, alive and well. Behold! *here I am*, alive and well."

He laughed, with a wolfish gleam of teeth.

"Do not look so mystified. I will explain. It gives me a rare pleasure to explain, now that everything has worked out so nicely. It will be my final act of grace towards you both; for when I have finished you will learn the doom that awaits you."

The danger steadied me. If we could only make a concerted dive for our weapons, one of us might have a chance of getting him before he could get us both. But, as if he read my thought, he laughed malevolently.

"Do not imagine you have the least loophole of escape. Jacob is here with me, equally armed. I am an excellent shot, but he is even better."

Surely enough, in the shadow over his shoulder, I could see the dim face of Weast with an expression I could hardly define. However, I thought no more of our guns.

"Yes," he went on, "behold in me Cyrus Quin, your venerable uncle – Cyrus Quin, millionaire (more or less) and philanthropist (when it suited my purpose). I *am* Cyrus Quin, and I have never been any other. Maximus Quin is a myth – that is to say, he is a myth since he died after a sinister existence, and for my own ends I perpetuated his evil career. Yes, Maximus, my brother – peace be to his ashes! – was hanged as a spy in the Great War.

"I speak feelingly of poor Maximus, because he was tarred with the same brush as myself. But he was a fool, or probably to-day he would be alive. Being dead, it suited me at times to bring him back to life. It was so easy to throw on the broad shoulders of Maximus the black deeds of Cyrus. I managed to conceal his death, kept him alive in name, and under the shelter of that name I was able to work unhampered. So you see, instead of Maximus Quin impersonating Cyrus, as you imagined, it was a case of Cyrus stepping into the shoes of Maximus.

"Now a word as to myself. I have always been unscrupulous. Some money I have made honestly, but most has been gained by calculated crookedness. And the more I made in this way the more it intrigued me, till finally all my above-board business became a blind to cover operations on a vast illegal scale. I was concerned in gun-running, in seal pirating, in black-birding. If there was any shady enterprise that offered a chance of big gain, I was ready to go in.

"But though I made much, I also lost much. My supposed huge wealth is mostly bluff. I am too great a gambler to be ever wealthy. If I had stuck to Wall Street – perhaps; but something of the pirate in my blood made me impatient of safer methods. So behold me, not a multi-millionaire as people think, but a paltry millionaire with an insatiable ambition to outdo them all.

"From crooked dealings to actual banditry is only a step. Intercourse with criminals had calloused me, so that more and more I trafficked with the world of crime. It was the infidelity of my wife that finally demoralised me, and the Great War gave me scope. But in my dealings with the underworld it was necessary to develop a second personality, and I invented the character of Sinistra – the name, by the way, of a real bandit who had been shot.

"At that time I had transferred the field of my operations to Europe, and there I came on the trail of little Brother Maximus. I traced him up, only to learn of his untimely end. It was then the idea came to me of carrying on under his name. So Sinistra became the alias of Maximus Quin; while back of both the pretended paralytic, Cyrus Quin, sat in his wheel-chair and posed as a philanthropist.

"There you have the whole situation. As Cyrus Quin became older and more enfeebled, Sinistra became younger

and more audacious. A life of crime and danger really rejuvenates one. As Sinistra, I looked a man of fifty; as Cyrus Quin, not a day under seventy. So by day I rested and schemed; by night I carried out my plots. The last of them was my effort to secure the serum of Professor Krug, and hold the world to ransom.

"And now let me tell you – I expect to have it within twenty-four hours. Just before you arrived I had an inspiration as to where it is hidden. When I have disposed of you, I go straight to its place of concealment. So that to the very end I triumph. Behold me at last Master of the Microbe.

"Something else I should tell you, however. My first crime was one of omission rather than of commission. I refer, my dear nephew, to the death of your father. I knew there was gas in the shaft. I might have warned him; but I wanted him out of the way – so I did nothing. After that, I killed no one directly till we come to Professor Krug and his gang, and I think I did right in ridding the world of those rascals.

"One death I have on my hands, though, that will torment me to the end. I refer to my late secretary, Miss Dale. But she knew too much, and she meant to betray me. She had, of course, the false idea that I was the wicked Maximus. Why she waited so long to denounce me I cannot understand. I stopped her on one of the bridges of the Seine, stunned her, and threw her over. Unfortunately I was too late to prevent her posting a letter, the contents of which I do not yet know. . . .

"And now, as I think I have explained everything, I will say a word as to your coming fate. It is very ingenious, and I flatter myself on its originality. You know, I have a mania for devising strange forms of human dissolution. This one I have planned for some time, though I did not think you two gentlemen were to have the honour of inaugurating it. I call it the Shower of Death. 'It droppeth like the gentle rain from Heaven,' et cetera. Listen then, and I will tell you.

"Here at my hand is a tap. It connects with a large tank that is full of strong sulphuric acid. When I turn the tap the acid pours out. It flows into each of these seven stars. The point of each star is bored, so that the acid streams down exactly like a shower. There you have my idea – a shower-bath of vitriol. The stars, you will observe, are placed so as to command every part of the chamber. By pressing flat

against the wall you may escape for a little, but not for long. When the last of the stars fills, there will be no means of shelter.

"Now you see the rare half-hour I am going to pass. Up here in my post of observation, serenely I will watch your dying struggles. I am a little sorry for you, Harley. In some ways I rather liked you. You are a fool and impulsive, but you have courage. I would like to save you if it were not for the man who is with you. For him I have the deadliest hate, and even at this late hour my revenge will be the sweetest thing I have ever experienced. I can assure you I will gloat over his antics in my bath of vitriol. And now I am going to turn on the tap."

With that Cyrus Quin reached one hand above his head, and almost immediately the nearest star took a greenish tint. Beneath the overhead light I could actually see the liquid running into its crystal receptacle. Now it was streaming steadily down, and the star next in line was filling. The thing fascinated me. Was my uncle speaking the truth? Was that liquid so fast flooding the stars really vitriol?

Now four of the seven were filled, and the streams were plainly audible. . . . Five now. Our pistols were under the shower, while the whole place was lit with a weird, green glare. I dared not move. Fearfully I stared at the two stars that remained, and even as I looked the sixth began to fill. Horror-stricken, I flattened myself against the wall, my eyes riveted on the seventh star, the one directly above us. The seventh star! Frantically I watched. Already its silvery radiance was blotched, already I could see the trickle of the green death. . . . Its point was green now, green the slender stream that spattered on the floor. At my very feet it fell, and, frenzied with terror I rose on tip-toe. Like one crucified I clutched the wall, controlling my shudders, glaring at the seventh star. Was this the end? I had no doubt of it. There came to me a last vision of Rosemary. I breathed a prayer. I seemed to feel the first bite of the acid. My knees bent under me. . . .

Then I heard a hoarse cry, the thud of a fall, a voice, wild, urgent :

"Make for the door. I'm going to open it."

My eyes went to the recess. No one was there. My gaze

fell to the floor. *Sprawled under the streams of vitriol, lay my Uncle Cyrus. He was face down, writhing, blackening.*

At the same moment I heard the door of the chamber flung open. Sliding along the wall, just as the seventh star filled, the count and I reeled from the room, and collapsed in the corridor beyond.

CHAPTER XII

THE YELLOW SAFE

1

WEAST was wildly excited as he helped us into a salon near by.

There, laughing hysterically, he plied us with brandy. Truly I thought the man was mad. But perhaps at that moment we were all a little mad. For myself, the sense of horror lay heavy on me, and my mind was back in that fatal chamber, where lay my uncle, sodden with the corroding acid.

But it was Weast who aroused me from my apathy of horror. He had left us for a moment. Now he returned.

"He's dead," said Weast, laughing. "I turned him over with a long pole. You'd never know it was he."

"I hope it was – the fall," I said, averting my eyes from Weast, for I did not like the look of the man.

"I hope it was not," he cried shrilly. "I hope he got a good dose of his own medicine. And it was no fall. I pushed him, pushed him into his own bath of vitriol. I hope he was conscious to the last."

I was amazed at the hate that rang in his words. It seemed as if the accumulated venom of a lifetime lay behind them. He appeared to be gloating over his mental picture of the man who now lay under the drip of the seven stars. Feverishly he paced before us, his eyes hot, his hands phrenetic. At times he would clutch his head, as if to prevent it bursting. The count sagged forward like a man in a state of collapse, but I would not take my eyes off Weast. He fascinated, terrified me.

Suddenly he began to laugh, mad, incoherent laughter, Then the wild look left his eyes, and into them came one of sly malignance.

"I must have another peep," he whispered.

"No, no, don't, Weast. It won't do you any good. Try to control yourself. He's dead. Let's – call it a job."

"Aye, and a good job. The best I ever did. Ah! God knows the dirty jobs he's made me do. If I hadn't, he'd have killed me in some fiendish way. I was afraid of him, horribly afraid." He spoke in a hoarse whisper. "To escape him I once tried to kill myself, but he brought me round. There was *no* escaping him. He came to own me body and soul. That is till——" He paused chokingly, his eyes fixed as if in pain. Then he went on in that harsh whisper.

" Till he killed *her*. You know whom I mean – Mona. I suspected it, but I had no proof. Not till he told you up there. Then I acted. The moment he confessed to that his power over me snapped. I knew that I was the avenger. And with my heart bursting with joy I hurled him down."

Weast was transfigured. His eyes flamed again, and his hands were more phrenetic than ever. I disliked the man's melodrama, so I said soothingly,

" Yes, yes. Miss Dale is well avenged. But why did you wait to do it for her? What was she to you?"

"My wife."

I was conscious of a shock. I could only stare at him as he went on:

"Yes, we were married – secretly. Not even the master suspected it. We planned to get away together. Then things became more and more complicated, and the snarl about us more difficult to untangle. It was for my sake she kept silent so long. Poor girl! If she did any wrong it was for me. And it was only towards the last she rounded on me. She liked you, you know. When she found that note to you had been written on her typewriter, she accused me, and I confessed everything. After that we conspired together against the master. It was she who was in the château the first time you escaped, she who dragged me to a place of safety."

"Now I understand."

"Yes, that made her desperate, and she determined to reveal everything. I begged her to wait a little, but she was hysterical. I had not told her all the truth, however. She, too, believed that it was your Uncle Maximus who sat in the chair. She thought the change had been effected that time she was away in America. Whereas there never had been any change. There never had been but your Uncle Cyrus."

" Poor Mona!"

" I loved her dearly," said Weast.

" And what are you going to do now?"

" Below us I have filled a cellar with dry wood and shavings. When you have gone I will light the lot. In a few hours nothing will be left of this house but a charred ruin. With all its secrets it will disappear. Then I, too, will disappear."

"Perhaps that will be best. But tell me – when my uncle spoke of being able to put his hand on the serum, was he only bluffing?"

"I don't know. He had an idea it is still in the professor's apartment. To-night we were going to search."

"But where?"

"What about the safe?"

"They examined the interior thoroughly. There can be no secret hiding-place."

Weast shrugged his shoulders. "I can tell you nothing more. But what do I care! Once I have fired the villa I wash my hands of the whole accursed thing."

" Then we'd better get away and leave you free. Come, Count."

I had to take de Florac's arm, he was so helpless. The last I saw of Weast was his ghastly face in the doorway. Just as I was going he handed me a Mauser similar to that Uncle Cyrus had used.

"Please take it, Mister Harley. I might be tempted——"

He pointed significantly to his head. I took the weapon; then the door shut on his tragic figure, and I never heard of him again.

"I'm going home, Count," I said, as I helped de Florac into the limousine.

"Can't I drive you there?" he asked feebly.

But I saw the old chap was all in. Besides, I thought the night air might clear my spinning head.

"Thank you, I want to walk. Get a good night's sleep. I'll see you in the morning. *Au revoir*."

2

I had not gone far, however, when I was sorry I had not accepted his offer. Snow! Out of the thick night it came mysteriously. Very gently it fell, yet with a conquering persistence. Soon I was walking on a white carpet, with all about me a fluttering vagueness that in the isolation of the

street lamps was like a pallid beeswarm. Quickly my hat and coat were covered, and the few people I met seemed silent phantoms. I felt as if I were a spectre in a phantasmal world.

When I left the count my mind was in the wildest whirl, but the soft snow seemed to deaden my senses. The hideous scene in which I had taken part was too recent to be fully realised. At that moment my sole feeling was one of profound gratitude for our escape. As for the rest, I would not allow my mind to dwell on it. So, with set face and staring eyes, I ploughed my way, glad of the mystic gloom about me. Amid its thick confusion I tried to keep my mind on Rosemary, and the thought of her was like a beacon in the night.

But as I walked warily in that strange silence, of a sudden I was confronted with gruesome reality. It emerged out of the vague nearness, a grey monster with rheumy yellow eyes. It was one of those big motor lorries that took away the dead; and even now its hooded and goggled attendants were carrying a limp form from the nearest house. Crossing to the other side of the street, I gave the thing a wide berth, but even there the grim impression persisted. The gaunt *camion*, sheeted with snow, the wraith-like figures, their sagging burden – it was all so secret, so sinister.

The microbes never rested in their work. Countless as the snowflakes about me, they gained in strength each day. And there was nothing to check them. The very air was contaminated. I must get away with Rosemary; away to a land that was clean and sane; away from this damned microbe that was going to destroy us all.

So thinking, and of a sudden crushed with intense weariness, I climbed heavily to my room, stumbled through the darkness to my bed, and slept like magic.

3

And I had a dreadful dream. . . .

I dreamed I was looking at a hill of the most radiant beauty, when all at once I seemed to see *within* it. That beauty was but a film, and beneath the thrilling glory of bud and bloom all was crawling corruption. Knotted masses of slimy things devoured each other and multiplied unceasingly. From oozy pits painfully they raised themselves; over greasy

rocks they dragged and twisted. And they were of every shape fantastically horrible.

Blind in the blackness there, they lived and thrived. Life unconquerable moved in them, ferociously attacking life. Unseen, implacable, deep in the dark they pursued their mission: they, the black microbes, the enemies of life, the agents of decay and death.

Looking through the ferny sweetness of the hill, all this I seemed to see. And my soul revolted, so that with a shuddering I awoke. At first I could not realise where I was; then as the familiar studio took form around me, I was reassured and comforted.

But with surprise I realised that the moonlight was flooding in on me. Indeed, so bright it was I could see the time on my alarm clock. Close on four. I had only slept a little over three hours. Yet I felt strangely wakeful; curiously excited, too. Going to the window, I paused and drew a deep breath, absolutely entranced at the wonder of the sight.

Below me lay the city under a coverlet of snow. Serenely beautiful, it seemed to sleep. Except for one shifting cloud, the sky had cleared, and the full moon was sovereign. Under it the roofs stretched in stainless ridge and pinnacle, an Alpine scene, as chaste and still as death itself. As I gazed on the radiant peace of the sleeping city, its loveliness took my heart.

But all at once a shadow seemed to fall. Looking up, I saw that the solitary cloud was passing. It obscured the moon, throwing its shadow on the snow-shrouded scene. It chilled the city like a blight, so that its brightness no longer thrilled me. It was gloomy as the grave itself.

Then a strange thing struck me. The changing cloud that masked the moon had taken a familiar shape, the shape of that hideous microbe that so often had haunted my dreams. It was of an uncertain oval, purple towards the centre, and stretching out wispy tentacles as it crawled across the sky. Murky and menacing, there it hung, as if it brooded over a doomed city.

For a long time, with ragged shiftings at the edges, it guarded its shape. Successfully it blotted out the moon; obstinately it cast its shadow till all was black below me. In despair I turned away. Was there no escape? Even in death was the evil old man to have his triumph? Full of foreboding, I paced the length of the studio. Was there nothing to be done?

My thoughts went to the apartment of the professor. From my window I could see the edge of the balcony, bulged out with snow. In that room I had seen his secretary die, and in its corner was the yellow safe. Why did my mind seek so persistently the yellow safe? They had examined it with meticulous care. Others, too, had examined it. Yet . . .

I put on some clothes and descended softly. At the professor's door I inserted my key. I had a fear that it might have been secured in some way; but no, the bolt worked only from the inside. At the double turn of my key it opened reluctantly. Once more I entered that house of evil memory.

Somehow I thought vividly of the first time I had crossed its threshold. Then my mind had been in a besotted muddle, but now I was too desperately sober. A sense of danger steadied me, and my brain worked with a hard, clear brightness. Crossing cautiously the hallway, I entered the tragic room. In the corner dimly I could see the yellow safe, its door standing open. On the little table near the sofa stood the lamp with the green shade. It was all so like the time before, that I had an eerie sense of reliving the past. I almost expected to see the old professor start up, to hear the step of Anton. Ghosts were about me. The place was haunted, and the horror of it fell on me anew.

But I mastered my fear and went on. And now I felt that I was under some strange inspiration, that Fate itself was directing my hand. I went to the lamp, and to my joy found that the electricity had not been cut off. I switched on the light.

Carrying the lamp with its cord trailing behind me, I went over to the yellow safe. Eagerly I examined the interior. Not a joint or break of any kind. Delicately I felt everywhere with my finger-tips. To see better I took off the lamp-shade. But the two simple compartments were frank in their honesty. No secret device, nothing that could conceal even a darning needle. No! I was foolish.

Then I drew a gasping breath that was almost a cry. With sudden excitement I was all a-tremble. On my knees before the yellow safe I paused, too overcome with emotion to do anything for a moment. I was trying to control my nerves; my heart was thumping; I was in a cold sweat. Then feverishly I felt again. Could it be? Could——? At last! At last! And so simple. What fools we had been. What fools! Triumph! Joy beyond telling! Thank God! Thank——

What was that? Someone was trying to open the outer door. Who could be coming? Enemies perhaps, more enemies. Well, I had the Mauser, and it would be death this time. For them or me. I would not yield while life remained. Quickly I turned out the light, and replaced the lamp on the table. I must hide. But where? Ah! the big cupboard that had already concealed me. I had no sooner reached it when I heard the front door opened. There were feet in the hall, very soft feet. Then the room door moved slowly, and from my hiding-place I could see two dim forms.

Against the vague window light it seemed to me that one of them was unusually tall, the other just as small. They made straight for the safe.

"*Diable!*" said a voice with a hoarse whispering quality, "the lamp-shade's on the floor. How's this?"

Then another voice so deep it was almost a growl. "*Himmel!* What if someone has been here before us!"

Where had I already heard those voices? I tried to pierce the gloom, but could distinguish nothing. And now the smaller of the two had fetched the lamp from the table and was hurrying to the safe with it. There he turned on the light.

As they faced the safe their backs were towards me. Both were down on their knees, peering inside by the unshaded light. The smaller of the two seemed to be feeling all about, just as I had done. A great fear thrilled me that they would discover what I had discovered. They must never do that. Come what might, I must act – and the moment was *now*. Stepping from the cupboard I shouted:

"Hands up!"

I think my voice must have had a quality of detonation, for they obeyed ever so promptly. Perhaps their action was involuntary. Anyway, up shot their arms, and exultantly I covered them. For a few moments we remained thus, then I decided on my course of action. I would march them out of the front door at the pistol point, and bolt it on them.

"Turn, both of you. Keep your hands high. A move to lower them means death."

As if worked by mechanism they turned slowly. Then from all three of us there burst a cry:

"*Julot!*"

"*Harlequin!*"

"*Doctor Hetz!*"

"*The nephew!*"

"What does it mean, Julot?" I gasped.

"It's Monsieur Jean Dulac you are addressing," growled the big doctor.

"Inspector Dulac of the Sûreté?"

"Just so," said Julot snappishly. "But, damn you, Harlequin, put down your gun. I'm tired of holding up my hands like this."

I lowered the pistol; they lowered their arms.

"Now for a mutual explanation," said Julot.

As I stared at him I was a bit puzzled. His perky moustache drooped walrus-like; his spare, muscular figure looked pursy and padded; his lean, hard face was relaxed to flabbiness. Though I recognised him well enough, I had to acknowledge a considerable physical difference. It was the official I saw before me, the slovenly Inspector Dulac, whose notorious good luck covered the nocturnal activity of Julot, the apache. But the two characters were sufficiently differentiated to deceive most people.

"Pardon, Inspector Dulac," I said politely.

"And what are you doing here, young man?" he snapped.

"The same as you, I guess. Searching for the silver cylinder."

"I hope you've had better luck than we've had."

"I have."

"What!" from both.

"I've found it," I remarked casually.

"No!" from both.

"Anyone but a boob would have found it quite easily. It's there."

"Where?"

"In the safe."

"We've searched the safe."

"You looked inside, but – *what about the door?* See! there's ten inches of thickness in that door. It's steel, with asbestos packing. Well, inside the asbestos packing of the door you'll find – the silver cylinder. Let me show you."

With that I stooped down and put my hand round the underside of the door till I touched a protuberance no bigger than a nail-head. This I pushed, till a round latch almost flush with the steel surface slipped back. Into my hand dropped an object that glittered.

"The silver cylinder," I said nonchalantly.

Julot was staring. "Well, I'm blowed. I'm a fool."

But the doctor snatched it from my hands, opened it, and was examining it excitedly. There was a sealed vial and a roll of crabbed manuscript.

"As I thought," he almost shouted in his exultation. "I was on the right track. But there's something here I never would have discovered – never. I would have been baffled in the end."

Julot was on his knees, ruefully poking a finger into the cavity in which the silver cylinder had reposed so long.

"Now we can breathe," said Doctor Hetz. "Let's have some air."

With a bold gesture he threw open the double windows and stepped out on to the little balcony. Standing there, a big, bearded figure, with the silver cylinder in his hand, he leaned over the unconscious city. As I watched him I had a vivid memory of another figure in just that position. Again I saw the withered professor with hate in his eyes, revenge in his heart. But the heart of Doctor Hetz was aglow with joy, and his eyes were radiant with triumph.

"It is not yet too late," he cried with a grand gesture, "France will be saved. Europe will be saved. Humanity, this moment, is immortal."

Dramatically he held on high the silver cylinder; then he turned and, to my dismay, kissed me on both cheeks.

As I extricated myself from his embrace, I happened to look up. That monstrous cloud had gone. The sky was clear, the moon shone down serenely. Under its garment of white the sleeping city was a picture of purity and peace. Only far away to the left was a blood-red glow like an angry sore, where the Villa Cæsar smouldered out its last.

"Victory!" boomed Doctor Hetz at my side.

"Rosemary!" I breathed to the beauty of the night.

Came a grunt from Julot at my back:

"Harlequin, you win."

THE END.

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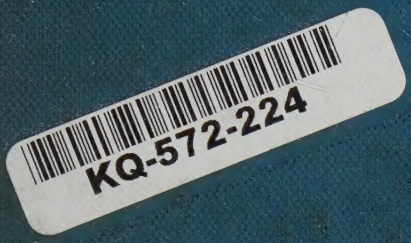
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